A META-MORPHOSIS

BY

RICHARD MARSH

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A METAMORPHOSIS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE TWICKENHAM PEERAGE

THE BEETLE: A MYSTERY

THE DEATH WHISTLE

BOTH SIDES OF THE VEIL

THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

MARVELS AND MYSTERIES

THE CRIME AND THE CRIMINAL

THE ADVENTURES OF AUGUSTUS SHORT

THE MAGNETIC GIRL

A METAMORPHOSIS

BY

RICHARD MARSH

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A METAMORPHOSIS

CHAPTER I

AT THE STILE

IT all began with an oak-tree at High Dene—that ideal home for a millionaire. The oak-tree stood in the home copse. Its owner, George Otway, leaned his back against it as he smoked a pipe. On the other side was a stile leading over the fence into the drive. As he smoked he heard steps approaching along the road. They reached the stile; then lingered. Voices became audible. One belonged to his cousin, Frank Andrews, the other to Dollie Lee, the girl to whom he was engaged to be married. Being within a few feet of where he stood he heard every word of what they said. In lazy and mischievous mood he listened; first in jest, then in earnest. They both owed all they had in the world—all they hoped to have—to him. There could hardly be any conversation between them to which they could seriously object to his listening; if there should be, then he would acquaint them with his presence, if they had not already discovered it for themselves.

They said several things—which they certainly did not desire him to overhear—yet he dropped no hint that they had a listener.

Plainly, they were in the very heart of an interesting discussion when they arrived at that stile. Frank's first question showed it. It was that question which caused his cousin to keep still behind the tree.

"Tell me honestly, Dollie, do you love me?"

Considering that this question was being put to Otway's affianced wife—by the one man in the world who ought not to have put it!—it was scarcely surprising that the millionaire remained quiescent; there was scant room for honesty either in the question or its answer.

Apparently Dollie felt that it was a matter which required no time for consideration; her answer came promptly:

"You know very well that I do."

Did he? That was pleasant hearing for Mr Otway. But Mr Andrews himself did not seem to have full assurance of the knowledge with which she credited him—or, at least, his tone suggested that he would like his assurance to be made doubly sure.

"Are you dead certain that you love me?"

"Look at me—can't you find what you want in my face?"

There was silence. The presumption was that he was looking, and finding what he wanted. Then there was a sound, which made Otway's jaw as rigid as if he had been suddenly attacked by tetanus. Presently came Dollie's voice:

"You shouldn't do it out here; it isn't fair. You don't know who may be about."

"And I don't care. I'd risk hell to do it."

Dollie laughed—an odd, fluttering laugh. She sighed, rapturously. The man behind the oak realised that his affianced wife was in his cousin's arms, and he knew what it meant to see red.

"How you're trembling."

"I should think I am. If you hold me like this much longer I shall—tremble all to pieces."

"And yet, feeling for me like this, you can talk of marrying Otway."

"I cannot only talk about it, I can do it—and I shall do it. My dear Frank—to speak of nothing else!—mamma would kill me if I didn't, even if she knew that I had made up my mind to run away from him an hour afterwards. She would congratulate herself that, in any case, she had got me off her hands; you don't know how that has become the one object of her existence. And the probabilities are that, whatever I did, he would give me something. He's a generous sort of creature. And what does it matter anyhow? You can kiss me when you want."

"Dollie, I believe that you're a devil."

"You're no saint. I shouldn't like you if you were. It's because—in spite of all his madnesses—George is a saint at bottom that I go all over gooseflesh whenever he comes near. Your near neighbourhood hasn't that effect on me. That'll do! Come! let's walk; I want you to tire me out."

They went off together down the drive, and the millionaire did nothing.

This girl he had met first of all at Wiesbaden, with her mother, Lady Helen Lee. They were stopping at the same hotel. A chance acquaintance rapidly ripened into a close intimacy. She was the most fascinating creature he had ever met, with, about her, such a way! He had offered his love and his millions. She had accepted the former, protesting unbounded affection in return. For the millions, she had observed, with a dainty pout, she did not care; going so far as to add, with delicious impertinence, that she was inclined to think that they made him just a trifle vulgar; as a natural man he was splendid, it was almost a pity he was gilded. He had laughed, and believed her; and all the time she had been this thing.

Frank Andrews was the only relative he had so far as he was aware. He had hunted him out of a city office, made him one of his managing men, a person of importance, of fortune, and he had done this to him in return.

The footsteps passed down the drive, faded away in the distance. George Otway remained where he was, with his back against the oak. He smoked his pipe right out; refilled it, smoked another. He was not only a strong—a masterful man; he had unusual powers of self-control, or he would hardly have been where he was. He realised that this was a position in which it would be well that he should think things right out, without heat or passion. He thought them out. At the end he had come to a resolution.

The incident of the stile had been the chief cause of his resolution. But, now that the thing had happened, he perceived, with that clarity of self-judgment which was one of his strongest points, that he himself had had a trend in that direction. The East had been calling, the old life beckoning. He had grown a little tired of High Dene, of the house in Carlton Terrace, the shooting in Scotland, the great houses which welcomed him with open doors, the troops of acquaintances who received him always with acclamations. He had enjoyed it at first: it was fresh, amusing. But now—now it had become monotonous.

He told himself, as he strolled up through the woods to the house, that it had become very monotonous indeed.

He was in the conservatory, still smoking, when Dollie came in, with that little rush which was characteristic of her,

seemingly not yet tired out. She exclaimed at sight of him:

"Hollo, George! you here! Where have you been?"

"I've been at the stile."

"At the stile?"

There was something either in his looks or his manner which seemed to startle her. She stopped in her onward movement. As she glanced up and met his eyes she went a little white. He was larger than the average man; she was smaller than the average woman, slenderly fashioned. He regarded her as a mastiff might have done a toy terrier.

"You were quite right—one never does know who is about. For instance, I was about—then."

She understood, and perceptibly shivered, as if overtaken by a sudden chill. As a rule the most loquacious creature breathing, she was tongue-tied. Without doubt, she was as much taken by surprise as he had been. And then his bearing, though not outwardly discourteous, was so instinct with contemptuous command, as if he were issuing his orders to some miserable underling, with such civility as the occasion permitted.

"Have the goodness to pack your trunks and leave my house within the hour; if they are not packed in that time you will have to leave with them unpacked. Your mother must go with you. If necessary I will explain to her why, but if you are wise you will save me that trouble. You will be able to invest the matter with an atmosphere of your own. But please to understand that if, within the hour, you are not gone, the servants will have instructions to turn you out, both of you, in whatever condition you may be. At High Dene we only give shelter to decent women."

He walked off without another word, leaving her standing as if rooted to the ground. In the corridor he perceived his cousin walking away in front of him.

"Andrews!" he cried.

The other turned. He was a slightly built man, younger than Otway, black-haired, with large black eyes, a carefully trimmed moustache, a soft voice—the sort of person likely to make a strong appeal to a certain type of woman. He greeted Otway with a smile.

"Want anything?"

"I merely want to inform you that Miss Lee and her

mother are leaving the house within the hour; so that it will give you an opportunity of going with them."

"Leaving?" Mr Andrews stared. "What do you mean?"

"You should preserve a remark of Miss Lee's on the tablets of your memory: in carriage-drives, and similar places, you never do know who may be about. I was at the stile—that is what I mean."

His look lent to his words a significance which penetrated to the other's brain. Something seemed to be moving under the skin on Mr Andrew's face. He moved back against the wall. He began to stammer:

"I couldn't help it—I—I didn't mean——"

Otway cut him short:

"Don't dare to speak—still less attempt to excuse yourself. I shall not be able to keep my hands off you if you do. In my present mood there is nothing I should enjoy better than to kill you. But I am afraid I should regret it afterwards—not for your sake; and the misfortune is that I should be satisfied with nothing short of killing you. So I will simply repeat that Miss Lee and her mother leave the house within the hour. If you choose you can go with them; you will find yourself in congenial society. If, after that time, you are found on my premises I will have you dragged by the heels to the boundary and then thrown into the road."

Mr Otway smiled to himself as he strode off. Possibly his fancy was tickled by two pictures which were present to his mind's eye: one, of a pretty girl, standing as if carved in stone, with all the light and life dying out of her face, and a look coming into it, as if she were suddenly growing old: the second, of a young man, a handsome fellow, cowering against a wall, as if he were a stricken cur. They might have changed the aspect of the whole world to him. He had cried evens. With at least equal unexpectedness, and with more than equal thoroughness, he had made of it a new world to them.

In his bedroom he found his valet, Hewett, engaged in putting away some new clothes which had just come down by train from town. As his master came in he turned to leave. Otway stopped him:

"You needn't go."

Hewett went on with his labours. His master, planting himself before a window, looked out over his park and lands.

It was a glorious prospect which stretched itself in front of him. No house in England has a finer natural situation than High Dene. But there are occasions on which the finest landscape fails to please. George Otway was the victim of one just then. Presently he spoke to Hewett. The man had been in his employment some time, and, besides, Otway had a trick—when the mood took him—of talking to his servants as if they were his personal friends.

"Hewett, do you ever get tired?"

"Do you mean sleepy, sir?"

"No; not sleepy. Tired of things—of everything."

"I fancy, sir, that we, many of us, feel tired at times."

"I've hit on one of those times."

"I shouldn't think you ever got like that, sir, really; not in the sense you speak of."

"Shouldn't you? How odd. And yet you're a man of experience. You've valeted grandees. Haven't any of them ever grown tired?"

"They've thought they have. But a liver pill, or something of that sort, has soon brought them to a different frame of mind.'

"Has it? That's odder than ever. Because I don't fancy that it would have that effect on me. I'm afraid it's more than the liver." He was silent for some seconds. "I'm so tired, Hewett, that I wouldn't mind changing places with you."

"That's what my first gentleman, young Lord Valentine, used to say when he was very drunk. But he never did. He couldn't have made a greater mess of things if he had. He drunk himself into his grave before he was thirty."

"Did he? That's an awful warning, Hewett. I suppose that I ought to learn from his fate, and not express a willingness to exchange with you. At least, I'll be like him in one respect: I'll not go beyond the expression."

Immediately afterwards he passed into his study, which adjoined. Hewett indulged in some inward comments as he folded a jacket.

"Never saw him that way before. Always thought nothing affected him either one way or the other. There's something up."

George Otway remained in his study about twenty minutes. Then he passed down his private staircase, through his own private door, into the grounds. He wore a suit of dark Harris

tweed and a hard felt hat. He carried an ivory-handled Malacca cane. It had been presented to him by a friend. On the gold mount were his initials. He bent his steps towards the nearest railway station, some three miles off. To reach it he had to pass through a country town. There he called on the manager of the local bank, whom he requested to give him cash for a cheque for £1000. The bank itself was closed; but Otway was far and away its largest customer, and the manager did not hesitate to do as he wanted. He gave him a thousand pounds in tens and fives, Otway expressing a desire to have the money in that particular form. He put the notes in a scarlet morocco letter-case, on which was a gold monogram, and the case itself into the inside pocket of his jacket. The manager noticed that, when he buttoned his jacket, the bulky letter-case was plainly visible beneath.

That bank manager was the last person in that part of the world who spoke to him—alive.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN ON THE BRIDGE

BETWEEN eleven and twelve that night he was on Southwark Bridge. Why he was there, or how, he would have found it difficult to say. Through the evening he had been following his nose hither and thither, without rhyme or reason. Now he was there; that was enough for him.

At that hour that part of London is apt to be like a place of the dead. It was inclined to be foggy. He had been wandering, for some minutes, in and out of narrow streets, between huge buildings, whose altitude was lost in the obscured air, without seeing a sign of a living thing. In his then frame of mind this brief pilgrimage in itself had had about it a flavour of the adventurous. His imagination had endowed the huge warehouses with a something mysterious, a shadow of awe. They compassed him about as if they were a grim array of prisons.

All at once he found himself coming on to a bridge. He did not know that it was Southwark Bridge. He only knew that it was a bridge, that the water was underneath—he heard it splashing against the piers; that the fog had grown dense; that his solitude had become more obvious.

This feeling of solitude was so insistent that it was almost with a consciousness of shock that he realised that, after all, he was not so alone as he had imagined. Towards the other end of the bridge, across the way, in the dimness was—what? was it a human figure? Yes, it was the figure of a man.

This fact was borne in on him simultaneously with another —with the fact that the man was essaying to mount the parapet. It was only when Otway had brought himself to a full stop, in an endeavour to see more clearly what the person over the way was doing, that it dawned upon him what his ungainly movements meant. Suddenly he appeared, raised above the pavement, a tremulous blotch as seen through the distorting mist. On the instant Otway was across the road.

Slipping his arms about the fellow's waist he bore him back upon the path.

There was a momentary silence. It had all happened so quickly. Each had taken the other so wholly by surprise. Both had to think of what to say. Otway was the first to speak.

"What did you do that for?"

Question was returned for question.

"Rather put it the other way—what did you do that for?"

There was a quality—a something—in the speaker's tone which Otway had not expected.

"Come this way; let me have a look at you."

He drew him towards a lamp-post, the stranger offering no opposition. He was a man of Otway's own build,—had he chosen he might have offered resistance which Otway would have found it difficult to overcome,—tall, broad-chested, loose-limbed. George Otway was forty. In actual years the stranger was probably his junior; possibly by half-a-dozen years. But there was that in his face which startled Otway—who flattered himself that he was a keen physiognomist—into an odd conviction that for him life was over. His features were drawn and anxious, there was what Otway described to himself as a haunted look in his eyes; his expression was as of one who keeps company, not with his fellows, but with things unseen. He regarded his deliverer from the pangs of a suicide's death with a glazed, impersonal stare.

"One saves even a dog from death if one is able. Why not a man? I could not allow you to commit suicide before my very eyes!"

"Such was not my desire. If you had warned me that your eyes were coming I would have waited till they had passed."

"But why do it at all?"

"What has that to do with you? Who are you that I should initiate you, on your own demand, into the intricacies of my private affairs?"

"It appears to me that, under the circumstances, I am entitled to require from you information. Otherwise it will be my plain duty, as a law-respecting citizen, to march you off to the next policeman."

The stranger seemed to be taking a mental inventory of the other's inches.

"You might find it difficult to do it."

Otway's rejoinder was grim.

"I think I might be able to keep a hold on you until, by my cries and shouts, I had brought the nearest constable to my assistance. I believe that on London bridges at night one is never very far away." As if to prove the truth of his surmise a steady tread was heard approaching. In the distance loomed a uniformed figure. "You see, here's one coming."

The man drew instinctively back. Otway gripped him by the arm. The fellow hesitated, as if considering whether it would be worth his while to show fight. Apparently he concluded that this was a case in which discretion would be the better part of valour.

"Don't give me to him—if I tell you something will you let me go?"

There was a bitterness in his tone which seemed to echo something which was in Otway's heart.

"It depends on what you tell me and upon whether it bears the stamp of truth. Not any lie will do. But if you show me sufficient cause why death is better for you than life, why, you may drown yourself within the next five minutes, and I'll not move a finger to stop you."

"You mean that?"

"I do. I'm in a mood in which I'm ready to let a man go to the devil in his own way."

"If I show you cause you'll let me go over there?"

He pointed to where, in the stillness, the waters were heard swirling about the piers below.

"It will have to be a sufficient cause."

"If I give you what even you shall admit are sufficient reasons why I should cease to live, do you swear that you will not hand me over to this policeman but will permit me to woo death after my own manner?"

"I swear it."

"Then I'll give you reason enough, and more—I am a murderer."

Had the fellow spoken with any sort of bombast; had he shown any sign of mental excitation; of that hideous exultation which marks the self-conscious criminal who parades his crime, desiring to add to it an even added shade of blackness, George Otway might—probably would—have doubted. But this man spoke with a coldness, a clearness,

a dispassionate directness, a terrible sincerity, which moved his listener to instantaneous credence. The policeman was coming close; the stranger fidgeted.

"Let us move away. The presence of a man-in-blue is to me like a biting frost; it chills me to the bone."

"Why should I not give you into custody?"

"Because you swore. I do not think you are a liar."

The man began to walk towards Southwark, Otway suffering him to go, keeping by his side.

"I may be. Who knows? I certainly should not be prepared to give myself a general testimonial. And a murderer! You are a thing accursed. All men's hands must be of necessity against you, and God's. For such as you there is no place upon His earth."

"Precisely. Which is why I wish to take myself off it. You see—you are quick to admit that I have cause enough."

"But why should you be permitted to choose the manner of your death? You have no title to be the master of your fate."

"You swore."

"I swore! What does that matter? Like you, I am not disposed to make a superstition of a careless oath. Besides, I have nothing but your word. People accuse themselves of murder whose hands are stainless."

"I am not one of them."

"How am I to know it?"

"You do know it. Still, if you've a taste that way, I'll give you the particulars, then you'll know it better. One moment, the policeman's on our heels."

Indeed, as he spoke, the constable went swinging by, peering at them as he passed, addressing to them a friendly greeting.

"Good-night, gentlemen."

Otway rejoined:

"Good-night, officer. Foggy weather."

The constable stopped to answer.

"It is inclined that way. I shouldn't be surprised if it were worse before long—fog's coming up the river."

"Nice night for suicides."

The constable gave a short laugh, as if the notion tickled him.

"There wouldn't be much chance for anyone who went

over in this weather—not much chance of getting him out, I mean. There's fog enough to make it impossible for you to see him, and the tide's coming up like a race. But we don't have many suicides here; Waterloo's the bridge for them."

"Still, I suppose, if one had a mind, this bridge would serve."

"Oh, yes, it would serve. Good-night, gentlemen."

The policeman strode off with quickened steps. The pair followed more slowly. When he was out of earshot the stranger asked:

"Have you a natural taste for cruelty?"

"Not that I am aware of—more than the average man."

"You knew that my nerves were on the rack; that each word you uttered wrung from them fresh agonies. You enjoyed the knowledge that you were torturing me."

"If chance remarks on suicide have that effect on you I should recommend you to avoid the thing itself."

"That is my affair. You have conceded me the liberty to make it so. I wish you good-bye."

The man turned as if to go. Otway caught him by the shoulder.

"Not so fast. You move too quickly. Do you imagine that I propose to be content with your bare assurance?"

"You insist on having full particulars? I see. You relish vicarious sensations; of your own you would probably soon weary. You remember what the papers, with their usual idiocy, labelled as 'The Vauxhall Junction Murder,' the case of the girl who was found dead in the train which had come from Guildford?" Otway nodded. "I killed her."

"Why?"

"Because I loved her. Sounds odd, doesn't it? It's a fact. I've found that it's the plain truths which do sound odd. She had pretended to love me. I discovered that it had been pretence throughout; that all the while she had been misbehaving herself with another man; sometimes with my kisses warm upon her lips. When I charged her with her treachery she twitted me with having allowed myself to be fooled so easily. I killed her then and there."

"Did you? It was savage justice; but, if the facts are as you have stated them, I am not sure it was not justice."

Otway's thoughts were of Dolly Lee.

"I am sure it was. It is better for the world that such women should be out of it. If it were required I would kill her again, now, although I have paid the penalty—the penalty!" The man stood straight up, gazing at the picture conjured up by his own imagination, with fixed, unseeing eyes, straight past Otway, as if Otway were not there. "It is with me as with the wretch in Hood's poem: ever since she has been with me day and night. Sometimes sitting rigid in the corner of the carriage with the marks of my fingers about her throat; her pretty throat; it was a pretty throat. Sometimes swaying forward as the train stopped suddenly, so that I had to lift her back into the seat. I killed her soon after we left Guildford, and travelled with her—dead—to Vauxhall Station. Each time the train jerked she swayed forward, and I had to lift her back. It is like that I see her oftenest, swaying forward. It has become so that it is like that I always see her; always, always, always. So I am resolved to get away from the sight of it through the gate of death—I cannot bear to see her always swaying—the monotony's too great; and I'll get away, even though I have to kill you also before I can escape."

"You need resort to no such drastic measures. You're free to go"—again the man made as if to turn; again the other had him in his grip—"on one condition."

"What is the condition? Tell me—quick! My patience is nearly at an end."

"The condition is that you—first—change clothes with me."

The stranger regarded him with bewildered glances.

"Change clothes with you?"

"I spoke with sufficient clearness."

"But—I don't understand." He looked Otway up and down, as if seeking in his appearance for something which would explain his words. "There is nothing the matter with your attire. Your clothes are better than mine."

"Possibly; at least, I do not doubt that they cost more. The man they came from charges for permission to become his customer. But that is not the point. I, like you, also wish to die; especially if it can be done by proxy."

"Don't—now—juggle with phrases. Make your meaning as plain as you can. I'm in a hurry."

"You see, when your—body is found, as it presumably

some time will be, the possibilities are that it will be in such a condition that the clothes upon it will be the only means of recognition. If those clothes are mine—and my name's on every rag I wear—they'll think I've found a watery grave, which will suit me very well."

The stranger was silent. Something came into his eyes which suggested a desire to read into the other's soul.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing as yet. It's a case of what I'm going to do. I also want to enter into another life, though by a different gate to the one you're choosing. I'm tired of my present life—plaguily tired. Matters will be simplified if the world believes that I am dead."

"Is it only a whim?"

"A whim!—only that; a mood!—but one which has me so strongly in its grip that only on my condition will I let you go. So admirable an opportunity of going through the process of metempsychosis may never recur."

"I don't see why I should object, since we both of us are mad together."

"Just so, since we both of us are mad! No reason whatever why you should object. The only question is where can we change?"

"That I'll manage. I cannot offer a sumptuous dressing-room, but I think I can promise freedom from observation."

He led the way across the bridge to the Surrey side, down a narrow lane, through a still narrower entry, into what seemed to be a yard. Here was a shed, which was entirely open on one side. The stranger stopped in front of it.

"This is our dressing-room. I believe that it contains bags of lime, but they'll not be in our way. It's not likely that anyone will interfere with us while we're undressing."

They both entered. What was within beside themselves—whether the stranger was or was not right in his surmise—in the pitchy blackness it was impossible to see. In silence each began to undress. Presently Otway spoke—one guessed that he smiled.

"This dressing-room of yours is draughty."

"I said I could not offer luxury. I suppose you only want my suit?"

"I want every stitch of clothing you have on, including your shirt, vests, socks, and boots. Don't I tell you that my

name's in full on everything I'm wearing, a fact which is at least well known to my man. If the body didn't have my socks on he'd spot it in a second."

"Your man? Do you mean your servant? You say your name's on everything; what is it? I should at least like to know who I am to be taken for—at the coroner's inquest."

"Otway. George Otway."

There was a fresh inflection in the other's voice.

"Otway! Not—the millionaire?"

"Men call me a millionaire."

"Then that's the meaning of it all! There's to be another financial smash; a new huge scandal in the city, spreading ruin broadcast. It's to escape the consequences that you want men to imagine you are dead. There's method in your madness that's something more tangible than a whim."

"Not a bit of it. You're wrong entirely. Financially, my affairs were never in a sounder condition. That's part of the trouble. If they weren't, if they were drifting into stormy waters, I'd be happy piloting them back into harbour, and the tougher the job the more I'd like it. But no such luck is likely to come my way. Everything I touch turns up trumps. It's monotonous. Now, since I've given you my name, what's yours?"

"My name is Jacob Gunston; you'll find it on all my clothes."

"The deuce I shall! That's unexpected. It may cause trouble."

"It'll make no difference to me if it does. Although I'm not a millionaire I suppose I'm entitled to have my name upon my clothes as well as you."

Silence again, shortly broken by a laugh from Otway, followed by an exclamation from Gunston.

"Don't laugh like that, man! You made me jump. This is no time for laughter."

"Sorry to have occasioned you inconvenience. I find the whole affair infinitely amusing." He had been transferring the thousand pounds in notes to the pocket of his new jacket. "Here's my letter-case. It has my monogram in gold outside; my cards and papers within. Since it's guaranteed to be waterproof, they alone should establish my identity beyond a doubt. Put it in your inside pocket. Here's my watch and chain. Have you a watch?"

"I've a silver one."

"You'll get the better of the exchange; mine's gold—I paid a hundred guineas for it—and there are some trifles on the chain which cost money, including a locket with a lady's portrait. Here's my ring; it's a single stone diamond. I've worn it on the little finger of my left hand for years. Put it on the little finger of your left hand. Does it fit?"

"It goes on."

"How do you feel in your new costume?"

"The coat is tight under the arms."

"Yours is loose; your tailor allows you more room than mine."

"I always insisted on having plenty of room in my clothes. These are tight all over. Before long they'd be beyond my bearing."

"There won't be time for you to reach that stage. Are you ready?"

"Quite. I'll show you back into the street, then I'll say good-bye—for good."

"Or evil. By the way, we've forgotten our hats. Here's mine; give me yours. Hollo! how odd! yours fits me perfectly. I take such an out size in hats that I've always had to have mine made for me. We've both of us great heads. Now I'm at your service."

Gunston led the way back into the street. Under a lamp-post they paused to survey each other. The first comment came from Otway.

"What a difference clothes do make to a man. I shouldn't have known you."

"Nor I you. Good-bye, Jacob Gunston."

"Good-bye, George Otway. I trust that you will not find the water unpleasantly cold."

Gunston—in Otway's clothes—turning right-about-face, walked off without another word. Otway, remaining under the lamp-post, watched him as he went. He swung along with long, even strides, looking straight in front of him—upright, resolute, with a something stiff in his bearing, as of a man who had been drilled.

"The fellow's been a soldier or, perhaps, a volunteer. Yet if he had he'd hardly talk about insisting on having plenty of room inside his clothes. Anyhow, he's a man of inches and of muscle: the sort that dies hard. I shouldn't be surprised

if, when it comes to the touch, the strong life which is in him insists on making a fight for it."

Gunston reached the end of the narrow street: without a backward glance, wheeling round the corner, he passed from sight.

"Now, what's the etiquette? What ought I to do? To follow might suggest a desire to observe his movements, which, under the circumstances, would be scarcely cricket. A delicate mind would rather avoid the faintest appearance of espionage. I'll go the other way."

But as he went he could not keep his imagination from straying after the vanished man.

"What's he doing now? How many yards is it from the corner to the bridge? Not many. By now he should be on it. How far on will he think it necessary? To the middle? I take it there's enough water to drown a man half-a-dozen feet from shore. Yet—he'll be safer in the centre. For one thing, he'll be more difficult to get at if there should be someone else about who's bent upon salvation, and it will be harder to reach dry land. If he's anything of a swimmer the trouble will begin when he gets into the water. It will need some resolution to restrain himself from striking out, knowing that a few strokes may give him a longer lease of life, when he feels he's going down. This world may seem pleasanter when the mud and the water begin to get into his mouth. For the strong swimmer, who persists in drowning himself, there must be some moments when he endures agony. Better choose some easier mode of dying. Still, if he had, it would have been harder for me to drown. I wonder if I'm drowned by now."

The wonder held him. His curiosity upon the point became so insistent that he could not hold himself back from seeking for an answer. He wandered over Blackfriars Bridge, then back again towards Southwark. As he approached it, down Queen Street, his steps became slower and slower, until at last he stopped—and looked ahead. What he had expected to see he could not have told himself, yet it was with an odd sense of relief that he realised that there was nothing to be seen. The bridge was apparently deserted. As, remembering his previous experience, he moved gradually nearer, he searched it with eager eyes.

The policeman's prediction seemed likely to be falsified.

At least thereabouts, just then: the fog had not grown thicker; on the contrary, it had lifted: he could see from end to end of the bridge. It was deserted. There was not a creature on it anywhere—of that he was sure.

Which made it the more strange that, as he advanced upon it, he should have been oppressed by so unreasonable an apprehension that he was not alone. No man had his nerves better under control; none less likely to suffer himself to be victimised by freaks of fancy. None the less, more than once he caught himself glancing, with a start, backward, over his shoulder, here and there—looking for he knew not what. The farther he went the more dominant his perception of an unseen companion became, until, about the middle of the bridge, he stopped dead, staring down at the pavement in front of him.

What was it which was lying at his feet? A stick? What stick? His own? Was it his own stick?—the one which he had given Jacob Gunston?

It was; his Malacca cane, with his initials on the gold band. As, picking it up, he recognised it, it was with obviously startled eyes that he glanced about him.

"Was it here—he did it? Here—that I was drowned? Then why wasn't my cane drowned with me? It ought to have been. Or—did he leave it behind on purpose? Being a man of acute perception, realising that if my stick was found just here, the inference would be conveyed that its owner had gone—over there. Perhaps he did. Shrewd fellow! Still I don't quite like it. If I am drowned I should like to have everything of mine drowned with me. So here goes!"

He hurled the cane into the air out over the river, listening for the sound of its splash as it entered the water. But he could hear nothing; only the rushing of the tide against the piers. As he stood, expectantly, a touch upon his shoulder affected him so as no touch had ever done before; he leaped round, with an exclamation, half of surprise, half of something akin to terror.

"Who the devil's that? Why, policeman, is it you? Officer, you startled me! I had no idea that anyone was near."

It was not the constable he had seen before. This was a younger man; one apparently more prone to suspicion. He

regarded him with what were plainly suspicious eyes. His tone was accusatory.

"I daresay. I thought you fancied you had it all to your self. What are you doing here?"

"I was looking at the river."

"Looking at the river? If you were only looking why did you jump like that when I touched you? You nearly jumped out of your skin."

"If I had quite it wouldn't have been strange; I was never before so taken by surprise."

"It's my duty to take people by surprise who're looking at the river at this time of night."

"I see. That view of a policeman's duty comes on me with the force of novelty."

"Does it? Then that's all right. Didn't I see you throw something into the water?"

"You may have done, if you have sharp eyes. I threw a piece of wood."

"A piece of wood? You're sure it was a piece of wood?"

"Perfectly certain."

"Where did you get it from?"

"I saw it lying on the pavement."

"Saw it lying on the pavement? What kind of a piece of wood was it?"

"It was a thin piece, about eighteen inches long. I threw it into the water because it was of no use to me, and because I wanted to know if I should hear it splash."

"Don't you know better than that? Don't you know you oughtn't to throw anything off a bridge? There's always people moving about underneath; you might do any amount of damage. Now move on, please. Do you know what the time is?"

George Otway looked at Jacob Gunston's silver watch.

"I didn't; but I do now. It's ten minutes to three."

"It's my duty not to allow people to loiter on the bridge at this time of night. So off you go."

"I believe you suspect me of an intention to commit suicide."

"Never mind what I suspect you of. I haven't said that I suspect you of anything. All I say is, off the bridge you go. So step it."

Otway did as the policeman told him, laughing to himself

as he went. It seemed so funny that he should be suspected of meditating suicide when he was drowned already. He was conscious that the constable remained standing where he had left him, following him with his eyes till he was clear of the bridge, and that then he himself marched to the Southwark side to make sure that this suspicious character did not retrace his steps.

Otway strolled back to Blackfriars, then down Fleet Street into Covent Garden. He had heard of the scenes which were to be witnessed there in the small hours; here was an opportunity to observe them. Business was already in full blast. He found his way into the flower market; discovering with delight the wealth of blooms; purchasing a bundle of rosebuds, from which he selected one which he put into his buttonhole; handing the rest to a girl who was buying her stock for the day, who received them with what might have been gratitude, but looked like surprise.

He loitered; had some breakfast at a shop in the Piazza; then, as it was nearly nine, and London was beginning to open all its eyes, he started off to look for rooms.

For the third time he traversed Southwark Bridge. It was a sunny morning; the fog had vanished; there was a fresh, soft breeze; the river, covered with craft, was looking its best. He lingered about the spot where he had thrown the Malacca cane into the air. It was a little difficult to recall the atmosphere; to understand how he could have been so weak as to have allowed himself to become possessed of such eerie imaginings. The world was alive—awake. The happenings of the night had been but the traffic of a dream. In the exhilaration born of the bright spring morning who cared for nightmares?

In a window of a house in a street off the Southwark Bridge Road he saw a card inscribed: "Apartments." He knocked. The door was opened by a tall, thin woman, past middle age. She showed him the rooms on the first floor. A cheerless ten-foot square room, which she called a sitting-room; another at the back, more cheerless, smaller, darker—the bedroom. She wanted twelve shillings a week for the two, gas fourpence a burner, coals fourpence a scuttle, boots a penny a pair. The whole thing was in such amazing contrast to the luxury of High Dene that it amused George Otway hugely. He laughed outright. It was like a chapter out of a fairy tale:

one of those games of make-believe which children so delight in. To live amid these surroundings, after the monotony of the uncrumpled rose leaves of High Dene, would be a change indeed. He would have engaged the rooms on the spot—only the decision was taken out of his hands.

His laughter, the cause of which was beyond her comprehension, had, as was perhaps natural, not altogether pleased the woman of the house. For all she knew he might be laughing at her; which, indeed, in a sense, he was.

She regarded him with sourer visage.

"Are you in business?"

"No; not at present."

"I only care for people who're in business. I don't like my lodgers to be at home in the day."

"Oh."

This point of view struck Otway as being in the highest degree unreasonable. Why did people want rooms if they were not to be in them whenever they chose?

"Where do you come from?"

The notion of being subjected to such a catechism tickled Otway more than ever. He laughed again. The woman's face became sourer still.

"Where do I come from? I come from the country."

"From the country? You don't look to me as if you came from the country. Where's your luggage?"

"Luggage? I haven't any."

"Haven't you? I guessed as much. Thank you; that's enough for me. Good-day."

Before he quite realised what was happening, the woman had opened the front door, and was ushering him through it into the street. Directly his feet were on the step outside the door was shut behind him with a bang. He laughed louder than before.

"It was the luggage did it. Even in this part of the world the stranger who desires to be esteemed respectable must have luggage."

With this idea he entered a shop where they sold clothes for men. Here he purchased a small black canvas-covered portmanteau, some shirts, underlinen, ties, odds and ends, and a suit of clothes—ready made. This latter he tried on there and then. As he was admiring the sit of the coat before a mirror, the salesman remarked:

"That coat fits you better than your own, Mr Gunston."

The customer turned sharply round.

"Gunston! How do you know my name is Gunston?"

"That's the name on the tape inside your jacket, and I took it for granted that the jacket was yours."

"On the tape? Of course, I see. I had forgotten it was there."

"Queer you should have forgotten your name was inside your own jacket. Here it is, you see, large as life, and twice as natural."

There was a free and easiness about the man's manner of address to which Mr Otway was unaccustomed from persons in his position. He paid for his purchases; the shopman observing, as he proceeded to arrange them in the portmanteau:

"You'll keep on the new suit, I suppose. You won't wear your—the old one."

As a matter of fact he had only given expression to what had been Otway's intention. But there was an insinuation in the fellow's tone for which he could have shaken him; as if the man took it for granted that if the customer's name were Gunston there was a desire to conceal it.

"I will wear my own suit, thank you."

Still in Jacob Gunston's clothes, and with the "luggage" in his hand, he again hied in quest of an abiding-place: this time with greater success. In a turning off the Borough Road he secured two rooms in the house of a Mrs Parsons. The landlady was a stout, good-natured-looking woman, with what seemed to be a trick of hiding her hands beneath her apron He gave his name as Jacob Gunston. At the mention of the name there came into her eyes a glimmer of recognition.

"Gunston! Aren't you employed at Armitage's?" He shook his head. "No? Well, my son, who's married, lives over by the Butts, he's a fitter there. I've heard him speak of a Mr Gunston—pays the hands, I think. Might be a relation of yours."

"So far as I'm aware I've no relation of the name in the world."

"This new name of mine," he told himself, when the woman was gone, "bids fair to be provocative of complications. It may be easy enough to die, but if one wishes to re-enter the world, plainly, one ought to be circumspect as to the label which one sticks on to oneself."

He examined his pockets. For the most part the contents consisted of valueless trifles—a stump of lead pencil; a well-worn knife; half a box of matches; a tobacco pouch; a briar pipe; a coarse, but clean pocket handkerchief, on which again was the name in full. If Mr Gunston had had any valuables about him, the presumption was that he had transferred them to his new attire. One thing, however, gave his representative pause. That was a piece of oilskin in a jacket pocket, which was not only carefully secured with string, but sealed. Without hesitation its finder cut the string and broke the seals. Within was a sheet of paper, which again contained three letters. On the sheet of paper was written, in a round, clerkly hand:

"Whoever opens this oilskin will please post the enclosed three letters, which are duly stamped and addressed.—Jacob Gunston."

One was addressed to "Mrs Burroughs, Palm Cottage, London Road, Guildford"; the second, "Miss Renwick, 16 Coulter Street, Rotherhithe"; the third, "To the Chief Inspector of Police, New Scotland Yard." Otway turned them over and over in his hand.

"It's as well that he left them here. If he'd put them in my pocket there'd have been trouble ahead. The discovery of such epistles on my person would have raised problems which every one concerned would have found it difficult to solve. I take it they're farewells and explanations and confessions and that kind of thing; the usual suicide's remainders. The question is what am I going to do with them? Shall I carry out instructions? slip them in a pillar box? Or—shall I investigate upon my own account? At any rate, not that. I'll compromise—slip them in the fire instead."

He burnt them on the instant, smiling down at them as he watched their transformation into ashes.

"There, for all I know, goes the solution of a first-class mystery; the quite possible result being that the perpetrators of still another crime will escape scot-free. It's the police who're to blame. That rare breed of dog, the sleuth-hound, continues to be badly wanted at Scotland Yard. If our detectives were only capable of detection there'd soon be an end, if not of crime, then at least of criminals."

For seven days nothing happened. George Otway diligently ransacked the newspaper in search of items of infor-

mation which might have a personal interest for him. In vain. On the eighth day, however, it was different.

To begin with, when he came down to breakfast a letter was lying on his plate. He stared at it in astonishment, picking it up gingerly, as if it were some dangerous thing.

"It can't be for me; unless Mrs Parsons has mentioned the fact of my existence to some local tradesman, who desires the favour of my patronage."

He opened it, and read as follows:—

"DEAR JACOB,—Why are you treating me like this? Why have you broken your promise? You know very well that it is only because I believed you that I kept still. *I will keep still no longer.* Do you think you can hide from me? You *cannot.* I will give you until to-morrow at noon. If by that time you have not acted I will, be the consequences what they may. In that case, God help us both.—MARY.

"You know very well, Jacob, that I mean what I say. So understand quite clearly that if, by to-morrow at noon you have not done what you promised, I WILL SPEAK."

George Otway laid down the letter with an expression on his face which denoted a total lack of comprehension.

"She will speak, will she? I wonder what she'll speak about! And who is Mary, anyhow? And what Jacob promised? I suspect Mrs Parsons of a persistence in connecting me with my namesake who pays the hands at 'Armitage's,' and I'm afraid she has been talking, which may explain how it is that Mary has jumped to the conclusion that her 'dear Jacob' is residing beneath this modest roof. However, breakfast first and problems afterwards."

He would have made a better meal if he had joined the newspaper with the "problems" and postponed them both till afterwards. On the centre page of the journal which he unfolded was a "scare" heading:

"MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF A MILLIONAIRE.
THE BODY OF MR GEORGE OTWAY
FOUND IN THE THAMES."

The sight of that banished from his mind all thoughts of the meal which Mrs Parsons had set before him; he eagerly read every line.

The principal part of the information which the paper conveyed to the world consisted of an exhaustive report of the coroner's inquest.

"So an inquest has been held upon me, has it?" commented Mr Otway when he realised the fact. "That's all right."

It appeared that a body had been found by a man who was in charge of a barge in a part of the river called Dagenham Pool, which was beyond Barking Reach.

"I'd got so far as that, had I?" observed the reader.

The body was in a dreadful state—a mere torso indeed—practically headless, with bones and ribs all shattered. On the clothing, and on other articles found on the deceased, was the name "George Otway." Mr Frank Andrews recognised the clothes as those which his cousin was wearing when he saw him last; all the other articles found were certainly his. There was also evidence of recognition from Hewett, a valet. Both witnesses had no doubt whatever that the body was that of the unfortunate millionaire. Hewett described a short conversation which he had with his master on the afternoon of his departure from High Dene, which made him think he had something on his mind. Mr Frank Andrews stated that throughout that day his cousin's manner had been most peculiar.

"Peculiar?" The reader grinned at the word. "You dear!—you sweet!"

Medical evidence went to prove that the body had been in the water at least a week. There was nothing to show how it had come by its dreadful injuries.

"I expect that I missed my footing at the take off, and that, instead of going straight into the water, I went crashing into the piers, which would be enough to smash up any body. I thought it possible that something of the sort would happen, and perhaps on the whole it was as well it did."

The verdict was to the effect that George Otway met his death by drowning; but that how he came into the water there was no evidence to show.

"Most satisfactory! nothing could be more so!" Leaning back in his chair, with his finger-tips Mr George Otway drummed approval on the breakfast-tray. "No suggestion of insanity or of anything else which could cause pain to the sorrowing hearts which are left behind—those sorrowing

hearts! The jury could not have delivered themselves of a more judicious verdict. And I am dead—by law—to the knowledge of the entire civilised world, so that I am really free—at last—to begin all over again; to tap fresh streams and trace them to their sources; to make myself intimately acquainted with some part of the great multitude of things of which hitherto I have had no knowledge. I've known one world; now I'll know another. So far as in my power lies I'll make the best of an opportunity which has not often come to any man. The average human has but one life to live—I'll have two."

While he pondered Mrs Parsons came into the room with a note in her hand.

"Where did you get this?"

"A boy brought it. He just slipped it into my hand as I opened the door, and was off without a word."

Mr Otway surveyed the writing on the envelope with feelings which were distinctly mixed. It was addressed "Mr Jacob Gunston," in the same hand which had been on the letter that had been awaiting him upon his plate. Within, on half a sheet of paper, were these lines:

"Dear Jacob,—I have decided, before speaking, to see you once again. You know I am not my own mistress; I cannot go and come as I please. But I will be with you within an hour of your getting this.—Mary."

"You'll be with me within the hour, will you, Mary? The deuce you will!"

He passed into his bedroom, the note in his hand.

An hour afterwards Mrs Parsons opened the street door to a young woman who had knocked.

"I want to see Mr Gunston," the visitor announced.

"Mr Gunston's gone."

"Gone!" The stranger started back. "Where has he gone?"

"That's more than I can tell you, though it's what I should like to know. When I went into his sitting-room I found his breakfast untouched, and a month's rent on a piece of paper in the middle of the table. On the piece of paper were two lines: 'Am suddenly called away. Please accept the accompanying in lieu of notice.' Just that and nothing more.

I call it very strange behaviour. Here's the paper; you can have a look at it if you like."

The stranger glanced at the paper which Mrs Parsons had given her.

"Do you say that this was written by Mr Gunston?"

"Certainly I say it."

"But this is not Jacob Gunston's handwriting—not my Jacob Gunston!"

The two women stared at each other as if each were endeavouring to find out what was at the back of the other's mind.

CHAPTER III

THE HARVEYS

GEORGE OTWAY'S next quarters were in a new £35-a-year red brick villa near Clapham Junction. The house was in the occupancy of a Mr and Mrs Harvey. It was Mrs Harvey who attracted him. She was little more than a girl. Short, slight, brown-haired, with a look upon her face which ill-accorded with her years. There was a suggestion of reluctance in her manner of showing him the rooms which piqued his curiosity; as if—in spite of the card in the window—she was not sure that she wanted a lodger at all, especially such an one as he was. Instead of extolling the goods she had to offer she more than hinted that they had manifold defects.

"I am not much of a cook," she confessed.

"And I'm not much of an epicure."

The rejoinder, or the smile with which it was accompanied, appeared to fill her with confusion.

"My husband says I cannot cook anything fit for a Christian to eat."

"Your husband? On such points husbands are proverbially critical. You may find me less exacting."

"Then, sometimes, I am not very well, and—that makes me seem neglectful."

"I can fend for myself."

"And, at times, my husband is—odd."

"Odd? What is your husband's occupation?

"He's the manager of a luncheon bar in the city."

"A very difficult position, I should imagine, for a man to fill. It might fairly be pleaded as a cover for a good deal of oddity. May I ask how long you have been married?"

"Six months."

Six months! And already that look upon her face. Otway began to be conscious of a big-brother sort of feeling towards the child-wife upon the spot. Her next words were plainly prompted by conflicting emotions.

"I don't think the rooms will suit you. I've so little experience. I—I'm afraid I sha'n't make you comfortable."

"I've no fear of anything of the kind; so I'll take the rooms if you will have me."

She suffered, rather than welcomed, him. He gave the name of John Scott, having already had more than enough of the pseudonym, Jacob Gunston.

He soon learned that she had spoken no more than the truth of herself. Her ignorance on all domestic matters was so complete as to be tragic. She did suffer from ill-health; things which should have been done were left undone. As a cook she was an absurdity: she could not even be relied upon to cook an egg with decency. Beyond doubt her husband had cause to complain of any meals which she might set before him. But, then, the fault was his own.

From childhood she had been in that bad school for housewives—a draper's shop. Behind a counter from early morning to late at night she had never had an opportunity of even dimly apprehending what were the duties appertaining to the mistress of a house. He knew this; and yet he married her. Her very helplessness appealed to him—then. It was only afterwards that he used it as a weapon with which to continually assail her. She admitted that now she was only nineteen. He was in the forties; a huge, beefy fellow—the typical publican. He used her as an animal trainer might use one of the helpless creatures at his mercy. He seemed to be compact of all the vices: coward, bully, drunkard. Night after night he came home drunk. It seemed that that was what his wife had meant when she had spoken of him as sometimes "odd." His physique enabled him to sleep off the effect of his libations sufficiently to permit of his returning in the morning to his duties in the atmosphere of the liquor which he loved. The strange thing was that she had had reason to more than suspect his "oddity" in the brief days of their amazing courtship—and yet she had married him. It had appeared to her that it was hers to choose between two forms of slavery—the counter of a sweating draper or the board of a bibulous husband. She was only a silly child, and had chosen the master whom she had hoped would prove the more lenient. Already, six months after, she had discovered that her choice had been erroneous; and knew, also, that soon she was to become a mother.

Otway, as John Scott, had been in the house barely a week when, playing the part of the unwise man, he interfered between husband and wife. He had come in late; after one of those wanderings through London streets at night, which, if only for their novelty, had suddenly assumed for him a singular fascination. He was commencing to have a glimpse of how the other ninety per cent. lives, and the beginnings of knowledge were to him a continual wonder. So soon as he opened the door he became conscious that the master of the house was lively; but that, at that hour, it seemed he always was. After a monologue in a candid strain—in that small place it was all so very audible—the wife was driven to bed, with imprecations. In his own time the husband followed. Overhead his presence was more obvious than it had been below. In his sitting-room Otway sat, smoking in grim silence—listening perforce—becoming more and more troubled by an itching at the ends of his fingers. Presently it became so troublesome as to stand in imperative need of an immediate cure.

"I rather think that he's dragging her out of bed." It seemed that something was happening above: the house was shaking. "I believe he's hitting her." Evidently a physical discussion of a kind was commencing, and it could only be of one kind. It was at this point that the itching became past bearing. "I am inclined to the opinion that I shall have to worry my landlord with an early morning call!"

He mounted the stairs three at a time, rapping smartly at the door of the room from which the sounds proceeded. There was no answer; the sounds continued—of a man's oaths, a woman's cries, appeals for mercy, worse; the occupants of the room were plainly too much engaged with each other to notice rappings at the door. Otway's blood grew hot all at once. He stood no more on ceremony. He threw open the door and entered.

The woman was in her nightdress, half crouching, half lying on the floor. Her husband, holding her down with one hand, pommelled her with the other. The lodger, catching him by the shoulders, swung him round against the wall with so much vigour that the red brick villa was shaken to its foundations. The girl-wife, glancing up, seeing who had interfered, hid her face against the carpet, and was seized with a convulsion of weeping. The man, breathless, taken by

surprise, stood gasping at his assailant, for the moment speechless. Otway, regarding him with scornful eyes, was the first to speak.

"I fancy, Mr Harvey, that, to-night, you had better occupy a separate apartment."

"What the——!"

The stream of interrogative adjectives began to flow. Otway, again taking his landlord by the shoulders, had him out of the room with a neatness and promptitude which did him credit—probably the man was outside before he quite understood what was happening. The woman lifted up her head from the floor.

"Don't! don't! don't!" she wailed. It was a pitiful hysterical cry.

Otway endeavoured to reassure her.

"It's all right, Mrs Harvey, don't be afraid. Nothing is going to happen. I am only going to say a quiet word or two to your husband in private."

He said them; the husband availing himself of the much needed support of the wall while he did so.

"Listen to me, Mr Harvey, and pay as much attention to what I say, as, in your present condition, you are able. If you don't take care I shall have to treat you as you have treated your wife. Only, as I am sober and in excellent condition, and you are neither, it's just possible that I sha'n't leave you with a whole bone in your body. You understand?"

Mr Harvey mumbled something in what he meant for reply.

"I haven't been doing anything to you; it's no business of yours; she's my wife."

"Precisely—which is exactly the reason why you should endeavour to conceal from her quite what manner of man you are. Come this way."

He was aware that on the same landing was an unoccupied bedroom. Taking his landlord by the arm he ushered him into it. The room was in darkness. He took a box of matches out of his pocket and struck one.

"That's light enough for you to get into bed by. Tumble in."

With really odd docility Mr Harvey did as he was told. He was in a sufficient state of undress to consider it unnecessary to disrobe any further. As soon as he was in a recumbent posture drink and exertion had their way—he sunk into stupor.

Otway tapped at the door of the room within which a woman still wailed.

"Mrs Harvey, your husband is already asleep. You must get into bed at once and have a good night's rest or you will be ill. Are you getting into bed?"

"Yes—I am getting into bed."

He waited a second or two.

"Are you in bed?"

"Yes—thank—you."

This with a sob.

"That's right. Good-night."

"Good-night."

It was a curious situation to which the lodger found himself. Not the less so because no allusion to the incidents of the night was afterwards made by either of the parties concerned. Mr Harvey held his peace; probably for sufficient reasons of his own. His wife held hers. Yet George Otway was well aware that the part he had played on that occasion of the display of marital discipline was frequently present in the minds of both. In the woman's eyes he thought, at times, he read something more than gratitude. The man's silence, he was sure, did not denote forgetfulness. On the contrary, he did not doubt that, if opportunity offered, his landlord would do his very best to cry him quits.

And opportunity came.

He had been in the house about a month, acclimatising himself to his surroundings with a readiness which puzzled even himself. As a housewife Mrs Harvey did not improve as the days went by; she did not grow worse only because deterioration would have been difficult. Yet the lodger, John Scott, seemed content. In the household reigned comparative peace. True, the landlord still came home, nightly, drunk, but he refrained from assaulting his wife with any other weapon than his tongue. Apparently the one lesson had been sufficient; or it is possible that he comforted himself with the reflection that he would make it up—and to spare—when the lodger had betaken himself elsewhere.

If that were the case events rid him of the intrusive Mr Scott sooner than either of the trio had expected.

One morning, on unfolding his paper, the first item of news which met Otway's gaze was one which took him by surprise. Staring him straight in the face were the words:

"THE VAUXHALL JUNCTION MURDER

FACTS WHICH POINT TO THE MURDERER

MARY RENWICK'S EXTRAORDINARY STORY

WHERE IS JACOB GUNSTON?

A REWARD OFFERED FOR HIS DISCOVERY"

For a moment John Scott saw—and read—without comprehending. Then understanding came with the force of a sudden shock. He saw what was meant. Fresh light had been thrown upon the murder of that young woman in the compartment of the Guildford train, which might make it awkward for —him. Very awkward, indeed. He judged that Mary Renwick was the young woman who had favoured him, as Jacob Gunston, with those two notes which had sent him flying from Mrs Parsons's. According to the paper, she had been relieving her mind, not only to the police, but to certain newspaper gentlemen as well.

As an acquaintance of Mr Gunston's, it had "come to her knowledge" that he knew more of the circumstances which attended the latter end of that young woman than he ought to have done. Now Otway began to understand what it really was which had induced that person to hasten to a "happy dispatch." Miss Renwick had informed him—there, in black and white, was what purported to be her own statement to that effect—that if he did not give himself up to the police, she would. Perceiving, possibly, that this was a lady of unusual resolution, he had promised to meet her wishes. He had undertaken to do so on the very night on which Mr Otway had encountered him on Southwark Bridge; that gentleman began to understand better and better. To Miss Renwick's sorrow, he had lied to her; instead of giving himself up he had merely transferred his lodgings to an address off the Borough Road. When he learnt that she had discovered him he fled again, so that the question now arose, Where is he?

Indeed, the question had arisen to so much purpose that the police were offering a reward of £100 for his discovery. It was with something besides amusement that Otway perceived in how many respects the description of the missing man tallied with his own. It might become uncomfortable for him if impertinent fingers were to point his

way. He might find himself in a position of much unpleasantness.

With a sudden flash his thoughts recurred to Jacob Gunston's suit of clothes.

"Confound the fellow's ancient garments! What did I do with them? What an ass I am! I believe I've left them lying about just anyhow and anywhere. Anyone with a pair of eyes who might come across them could hardly help but see his name upon the tags; and as Mrs Harvey sometimes takes it into her head to—what she calls—tidy up for me, it's quite on the cards—by George!"

On the instant he was on his feet and in his bedroom, which was entered through folding-doors. He had remembered all at once that, less than half-an-hour ago, in searching for his jacket, he had tossed Gunston's coat upon the bed, and left it there. The hour appointed for "doing" his bedroom was a movable fixture. He had known it to have been yet undone when he retired to rest at night. On the other hand, there were times when Mrs Harvey started to perform the necessary offices so soon as he was out of it. As he was seating himself at the breakfast-table he had fancied that he had heard the bedroom door open and shut. If so, under the circumstances, it was desirable that he should put that apparently tell-tale garment into a place of safety before it came into his landlady's hands.

The moment, however, he was through the folding-doors he realised that he already was too late. Mrs Harvey, holding the jacket, was cutting off the name-tag with a pair of scissors. The meaning of her action was unmistakable. Yet—if only for the sake of gaining time to collect his scattered senses—he pretended not to understand.

"Hollo, Mrs Harvey, what are you doing there?"

"I am cutting off your name—your name!"

She repeated the two words, "your name," with an emphasis which affected him disagreeably.

"My name! I didn't know it was on my clothes."

"It is not on those which you are wearing now. It was, and is, on those which you were wearing when you came. I have wondered what it meant—Jacob Gunston."

"Jacob Gunston?" He laughed; a laugh which was conspicuously forced. "But my name's John Scott."

"Yes; it's John Scott now."

Again there was that emphasis which filled him with such a sense of odd discomfort. She continued cutting off the tag, while he stood watching her, feeling like a fool. At last he found more words, which he knew were ridiculously inadequate.

"Why, Mrs Harvey, what do you mean? Your tone hints at all sorts of dreadful things."

Her answer, which was in the form of a question, took him aback.

"Why did you kill her?"

He stared. For a second he could not think to whom or what the reference applied.

"Kill her! Kill whom?"

She judged him to be merely fencing.

"You know. Be honest with me, now! Please! I did not think you were that kind of man. Are all men wicked? all men?"

There was an accent in her voice which touched him to the heart. Suddenly they had changed places. This foolish girl had become the dominant personality. He was the factor which did not count. She regarded him steadfastly, so that he saw that there was a new light in her eyes, which confounded him. Seeing him tongue-tied, she went on speaking. It was as if she were an accusing spirit, anguished because of the necessity of passing judgment.

"I did not think you were that kind of man. I thought that you were honest, brave, and true; that you were always good to women. And now—you to do this thing—to that girl! Why did you kill her?"

"I did not kill her."

"Don't lie to me! not now! don't! don't! You did kill her, or why have you hid yourself? Why did you come here under a false name? Why have you stayed in the house all day and only ventured out at night?" He recalled, with a start, that his habits had been nocturnal ones, though she was so wholly at sea in the inference she drew. "This showed you killed her!" She held up the name-tag. "And your face shows it, at last! I thought it was the honestest face I'd ever seen; but now I see there's murderer on it, as plainly as if it were printed there. You may glare at me if you like, Jacob Gunston! I'm used to being glared at! You may kill me now, if it would please you. I don't care!"

She stretched out her arms towards him, as if inviting him to take her at her word: to do his worst. He cast about in his mind for some means of making plain to her the mistake that she was making. But in the confusion into which his mental faculties had been suddenly thrown it was not easy.

"Let me beg of you, Mrs Harvey, to try and calm yourself."

"Calm myself! It is not necessary for me to do that, since you are calm enough; you who never ought to know what it is to be at peace again."

"But why?"

"You ask me why! Have you seen this morning's paper?"

"I have."

"Have you not seen that £100 reward is offered for your arrest?"

"You are under a complete misapprehension. I am not the person you suppose."

"Is this not your coat? Were you not wearing it when you came here? How comes Jacob Gunston's name to be upon your coat if you are not Jacob Gunston? I knew your name was Jacob Gunston before you had been here four-and-twenty hours. I saw it on all the clothes you had taken off and exchanged for the brand-new ones you are wearing now. Though I guessed that for some cause you were hiding I did not know who Jacob Gunston was; but now—now—I know! Will you swear that your name's John Scott?"

"I confess——"

"You confess it isn't?"

"If confess is not too strong a word to use in such a connection, certainly. But, at the same time, I assure you that I am not Jacob Gunston."

"No, you are not, because you don't wear his clothes any longer, and call yourself John Scott. Oh, you've a quick tongue, I don't doubt, and can make up a tale to suit any name you choose to take. I tell you you're not the sort of man I thought you were. You've taken me in finely. But if I were to go round to the station-house, and bring a policeman back with me, I shouldn't find you here on my return, or I should have earned £100 if you waited for that policeman's coming. Tell me! why shouldn't I go to the station-house right straight away?"

"You'd be very foolish if you did."

"Foolish! Oh, of course, I should be foolish! I'm always foolish! I'm only a fool! a fool! a fool!"

Dropping on her knees by the bedside, burying her face in the bedclothes, she began to cry with a degree of violence which threatened to shake her into pieces. This last move troubled Otway even more than her first. As he hesitated as to what he ought to do to stem the torrent of the woman's sobs an interpolation came from an unexpected quarter.

"I am afraid I am interrupting an interesting discussion. Does this sort of thing take place every day after I am gone?"

The words did what Otway had feared he might himself be unable to do: they dried the woman's tears. She was on her feet, and, though her cheeks were wet, her weeping on the instant ceased. In the door her husband was standing, garbed as he had been when leaving for the city, perhaps an hour before: silk hat on head, walking-stick in hand. She gazed at him as she might have done at an apparition.

"I didn't know that you were coming back."

"No, I suppose not, or this little discussion might have been postponed, eh? Well, I have come back—see? And I suppose I can come back to my own house when and how I please, even though sometimes my return may be inconvenient to you." He looked towards Otway with insolent eyes. "Good morning to you—Mr Scott."

He prefixed the name with what seemed to Otway to be an ominous pause. The lodger merely nodded in reply, taking care to allow no sign to escape him that he perceived anything peculiar in the landlord's bearing. Having had enough of looking the lodger up and down, in a way which that gentleman would have liked to have been able to resent outwardly as well as inwardly, Mr Harvey turned to his wife, addressing her as if she were some inferior animal—as, indeed, it was his wont to do.

"Come out of this—come along with me. I want to have a talk with you."

She went with her lord, obediently. John Scott returned to his unfinished breakfast: any appetite he may have had had altogether gone; and for the enjoyment of Mrs Harvey's breakfasts, hunger in a superlative degree was always an absolute necessity. He was filled with a sense of discomfort which would be inadequately described as vague. Probably Mr Harvey's premature return had been accidental: had, at

least, no connection with him. But—how long had he been in that room before he himself made known his presence? or just outside it well within hearing?

So far from having tired of playing at being someone else, George Otway was only just beginning to really enjoy the game. Since he had left High Dene behind, and all that High Dene connoted, he had seemed to himself to have slipped off at least a dozen years. He was feeling twice the man he had been used to feel of late. If this foolishness of his association with Jacob Gunston were pushed only one step farther there would be an end of his good time. Of such quality was the spirit of mischief which had entered into him that he would rather have enjoyed being locked up, and brought before a magistrate, always with an eye to the fiasco, from the policeman's point of view, which would be the ultimate result. Only, in that case, it was hardly likely that he would be able to continue to conceal the fact that he was George Otway, and that would mean the spoiling of the fun.

How much had his landlord heard? What use might he be expected to make of the information he imagined himself to have acquired?

Any doubts Mr Otway had upon that subject were presently disposed of. He heard the front door open and shut. He saw his landlord pass the window. Instantly Mrs Harvey came running into the room, her face all distorted by her agitation, so moved by conflicting emotions as to be scarcely articulate.

"You must go at once! at once! He's gone for the police!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, although he knew.

"He heard what was said—he made me tell him the rest—he's got the tag with your name upon it. He'd give anything, do anything, to hang you."

Otway thought for a second, or tried to.

"If it weren't for other considerations I'd baulk him of his gentle desires in a fashion of which he's no conception. But as it is——"

He stopped. Mrs Harvey was standing in the bow window. She began to exclaim:

"He's coming!—it's too late!—you're lost! He must have found a policeman in the street!"

"Coming with a policeman is he?"

"Why didn't you go when I told you? Now it's too late!—too late!"

"Don't you be so sure of that. Doesn't the yard wall run into the street behind?"

"Yes, it does!" She caught his meaning. "If you go along it you may still get away. I'll drop the latch and pretend I'm ill or something, and keep them out as long as I can."

He acted on the hint, had his hat on, was in the yard, on the wall, along it, with a celerity which, at any other time, would have surprised himself. The houses at the back were of the semi-detached variety, the wall ran right between two of them into the street beyond. He reached that street without, so far as he was aware, having attracted anyone's attention. He walked briskly towards Lavender Hill. There he boarded a tramcar which happened to be passing, alighting from it at its terminus in the Westminster Bridge Road, chuckling to himself as he rode at the mental picture which he drew of what might be taking place in the house which he had just now quitted. How long would Mrs Harvey be able to keep them out on the strength of that dropped latch? Little would be needed to make her pretence at illness a very actual fact. Then the position would have become still more complicated. Her husband might threaten, and the policeman might awe her as representing the majesty of the law, but the two together would be able to obtain but scanty satisfaction out of a stricken woman.

CHAPTER IV

A FRIEND IN NEED

HOW he spent that day George Otway would, afterwards, have found it difficult to describe in detail. He wandered hither and thither; lunched at a Soho restaurant; late in the afternoon found himself on a seat in Hyde Park, near the Marble Arch. The seat was originally in the sole occupation of another gentleman, who, soon after the newcomer had begun to share it, showed himself to be conversationally inclined.

"So they've had a shy at that there Gunston."

The remark was so apposite and so extremely unexpected that Mr Otway might have been excused if he had been startled into self-betrayal. But, as it chanced, he was feeling more than a little tired, and also was in a frame of mind in which he was prepared for anything to happen—even the things for which he was unprepared. So, although he was surprised, he only turned his head with a languid sort of interest. The speaker was a shabbily-dressed individual, probably between fifty and sixty years of age, with something in his general appearance which suggested argumentativeness. It is odd how many argumentative people one may meet in the neighbourhood of the Marble Arch.

"I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"I say they've been having a shy at that Gunston fellow? I suppose you've seen about it."

"I'm afraid I've not."

Mr Otway had not seen, in the sense the speaker apparently meant. He had learnt all he knew first hand.

"It's in the papers."

"In the papers?"

"I suppose you see the papers, don't you?"

"Oh yes, I see the papers—that is, I saw a morning paper."

"Ah, then you haven't seen; it's the evening papers I'm referring to."

"Is there anything in them of interest about—this Gunston fellow?"

The other was silent, as if considering his answer. Then he stood up, settling his ancient coat in its place as he did so. Apparently his conversational vein had all at once given out.

"It depends on what you call of interest. Some may think it of interest; I do. Some mayn't—you mightn't. There it is: there's no accounting for people's tastes. You'll find the evening papers on sale outside. If you buy one you'll be able to say if they contain anything of interest to you. Only don't say I advised the purchase, that's all. I never advise anyone."

He marched away with the air of a man who has just been administering a well-merited rebuke. Otway was slightly amused. The stranger's method of declining to discuss a topic which he himself had broached had about it a touch of character. What was the meaning of his reference to "a shy at that Gunston fellow?" What was in the evening papers? It might be as well to see.

Strolling out into the street he was immediately confronted by a boy who was selling the *Evening News*. These words flared out from the contents bill:

"THE VAUXHALL JUNCTION MURDERER'S ESCAPE

AT LARGE IN LONDON"

They struck Otway with a sense of singularity. He bought a copy of the paper to see what they might mean. It was plain enough.

Mr Harvey, putting himself in communication with the reporters, had given his own version of the incidents of the morning. They lost nothing by his manner of treatment. The whole world was informed how he had suddenly discovered that he was harbouring—in the bosom of his own family—a murderer; how he had raced off for the police, how he had returned with a constable, only to find the murderer gone. As his wife had put it, it was pretty plain that Mr Harvey would do a good deal to have the "miscreant" hung. Evidently he had not forgotton the night on which he had been prevented from the full enjoyment of his marital rights.

The newspaper proceeded to point out, on its own account, that the fugitive was, probably, at large in London. It was unlikely that he could have got far away. Let every man, woman, and child be on the look-out for him. It was extremely possible that he was at that moment pacing the streets in search of shelter. Let the proprietors of hotels, lodgings, eating-houses, be on their guard. It would be a scandal if, before night, he was not safely under lock and key. Then followed a minute description of the clothing and appearance of "THE MAN WHO IS WANTED."

This was pleasant reading for George Otway. He suddenly realised what a peculiar personal meaning might be conveyed by the words: every man's hand is against him. In a very literal sense it would seem that every hand was. The whole city was hunting him. The loungers about the Arch, the people waiting for the omnibuses, passers-by—most of them were patrons of the evening papers. They had only to glance up at him to recognise their quarry. As he grasped this fact Otway became conscious of a very singular sensation. Why, if the paper-boy was a student of his own wares, the thing was settled on the spot; nothing escaped a paper-boy's sharp eyes. Possibly that boy's taste in literature was confined to the commercial side. He had given his customer change for sixpence in sublime indifference to the fact that here, at his finger ends, was a fortune—the equivalent to £100.

And yet, surely, his likeness to the man described was unmistakable. The ingenious Mr Harvey had made such a strong point of the clothes which he was wearing at the moment of his flight. The bowler hat, with the name of the maker, "W. Powell," inside; the suit of dark-grey tweeds; the black-silk tie with small scarlet spots: Otway, instinctively putting his hand up to his necktie, would have liked to have torn it off. Then the tell-tale beard; no one could mistake that beard. Why had he not gone straight to a barber and had it shaved right off? Now it was out of the question. Probably the first barber he went to with such a request would identify him there and then. Indeed, the strange thing was that he had not been identified already. Among the shifting throngs must be many readers of the late editions: it was odd that none of them had spotted the man they had just been reading about.

What was he to do? What could he do? The world had been informed that he was probably pacing the streets. He could hardly hope to continue to do so with impunity much longer. How could he obtain shelter? At the first place he asked for a bed they might hand him over to a policeman. Should he make an effort to get clear of London? He might succeed in doing so; but if he did it would only be the same thing over again. By to-morrow his description would be known all over England. In the country his chances of hiding himself would be less than in town. As for putting his native land behind him and seeking seclusion on the Continent, to attempt to do so by the ordinary channels would be madness. Every passenger who boards a boat bound to the Continent—especially when some notorious criminal is particularly "wanted"—is keenly scrutinised by authoritative eyes. He would be certain to be recognised.

No; if he wished to get out of England a free man, and, if only for the mere sport of baulking pursuit, he felt he would like to—he would have to choose some bye-path. Ship himself aboard some craft where either ignorance was bliss or where no questions would be asked. Such boats were doubtless to be found in plenty. He might hit upon some foreign vessel, some humble trader, by whom no passengers were carried as a rule, but who would be willing, for a consideration, to find room for an eccentric Englishman. It would be amusing, at anyrate, to try his luck. However, vessels of no kind are to be found that end of town, so he decided to hie him to the other pole of London—to the regions of the sailorman and of the great docks.

He chartered a hansom, reasoning that by that means he would best escape observation. He would have the vehicle to himself, and so escape the possibly curious glances of fellow-passengers. He told the man to drive to High Street, Wapping. He had never been there in his life, but had a dim idea that there were ships at Wapping. The cabman regarded him with a hesitant eye, as if doubtful whether he had given his destination correctly.

"High Street, Wapping?"

Otway nodded, took his seat, the cab drove off. It was now towards evening; the work of the day was over, everywhere the workers were hastening home. As they neared the

end of Newgate Street the trap-door in the roof was opened, the cabman's voice came down.

"Did you say High Street, Wapping?"

"I did."

The fare wondered why the inquiry was repeated. He had made himself clear enough at first. They passed the Tower. As they were going by St Katharine's Dock the trap-door was raised again.

"What," thought Otway, "is coming now? If he wants me to act as guide I'm afraid I am incompetent."

But the cabman wanted nothing of the sort. He had information of his own to impart.

"This won't do, you know. It's a bit too thin. You're Jacob Gunston."

Otway sat still. He had half fancied that something of the sort was coming, that being the kind of remark which he might expect at any moment from any quarter. The man drove steadily on, waiting up aloft for his fare to respond.

"What do you mean?"

"None of your bluff. I tell you it's a bit too thin—I thought it was you when you first came up. Now I'm sure. So lies are off. What am I going to do with you?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"You're a cool hand. I could see you were that directly I got sight of you. That don't make me like you any the worse; I prefer 'em cool." He flicked his horse artistically, with a little twirl of the lash. Then he bent more forward, so that his voice came clearly to the passenger within. "It's this way with me: I've been in trouble myself; though, thank goodness, not your sort, so that I've got a kind of fellow-feeling for a chap that's got to face it. But I've been having a bad time lately, this week it's been awful. It'll be a hundred quid in my pocket if I drive you to the next police station. What'll you give me if I don't?"

"Your fare."

"I daresay. And how much over?"

"I always make a point of giving a civil cabman something over his legal fare."

"You do, do you. So it's like that. All right, I'll earn that hundred quid."

He whipped up his horse. Otway raised his voice:

"One moment—give me time to consider."

The driver slacked his pace.

"Now you're talking sense. Only be quick about it. It's a risky game I'm playing. If I did my duty, according to the law, I didn't ought to let you have so much as half a chance. If any one saw you riding in my cab I'd be fairly landed. Sit well back. Now how much is it going to be?—let's have it!"

"If you will set me down in High Street, Wapping, and promise that you'll hold your tongue, I'll give you a five-pound note."

"Make it fifty. If your life's not worth fifty pounds, it's not worth much."

Otway was aware that he was at the fellow's mercy. After his demand had been satisfied he might still turn traitor. If, on the contrary, he did not give him what he asked it was certain that he would soon find himself in a policeman's hands. To attempt to escape from a resolute driver of a hansom cab, who was bent on raising a hue and cry, would be to essay a forlorn hope indeed. So he expressed his willingness to be blackmailed.

"You manage to keep that fellow-feeling of which you spoke well under control."

"I've got to; every man's got to look after himself. You were looking after yourself, I suppose, when you got into my cab. I don't want any patter. Is it going to be your fifty quid, or His Majesty's hundred?"

"Set me down where I told you, and undertake to keep still, and you shall have your £50."

"Good! Trust me to know when silence is golden. You don't suppose I should blab after a little deal of that sort? It would be telling tales against myself. Then where should I be? Why, in the same box as you are. No, thank you, not for Jacko! Hadn't you better give me the pieces now?—no owings!—you've got it on you?"

"I have. You perform your part of the bargain and I'll perform mine as soon as I'm out of your cab. You needn't be afraid of my trying to run away."

"I'm not."

The tone was grim. None the less, the driver allowed the trap-door to continue open, as if he felt that it would be just as well to keep an eye on what was taking place within. Presently he spoke again.

"Which part of the High Street do you want?"

"I'm indifferent; any part will do for me."

"Then get your money ready, because we're almost there." Soon the cab began to slow. "This is High Street; have you got the coin? No larks, you know."

"I tell you again that so soon as I am outside your cab you shall have your money."

The cab stopped.

"Very well, then, here you are. Now where's that cash?"

Otway stepped on to the pavement. From a letter-case he took a roll of notes, regarding his Jehu fixedly as he did so. The driver was a youngish man, with a red face, a black moustache, an oiled top hat, and a flower in his button-hole, who kept his eyes fixed on the notes.

"I hope those flimsies of yours are all right. No Bank of Elegance for me."

"These notes were issued by the Bank of England."

The cabman, shifting his gaze to his fare's countenance, was moved to candour

"That description in the paper ticks you off to a T. If I were you I'd get outside those clothes and into another lot in half a flash of lightning, if I had to commit burglary to do it; any one who sees you in 'em, and has read what's in the paper, would spot you in a jiffy."

"You think so?"

As Otway, leisurely enough, was counting out the notes, some one, coming rushing at him, gripped him by the shoulder, and began shouting at the top of his voice:

"You're Jacob Gunston! Police! police! help! this man's Gunston!"

Instantly the cabman showed the cloven hoof, speaking as excitedly as if the notion of his fare's identity had only just occurred to him.

"I thought as much! I'd half a mind to drive him to the station-house myself! He's my prisoner!"

He began to dismount from his box, with an evident determination to secure the spoil which was bidding fair to slip between his fingers. At the moment passers-by were few; but the stranger—who, as he clung to Otway, seemed to be seized with a sort of frenzy—was making such a hullabaloo that he could hardly fail to attract the attention of those whose ears were of normal quality.

"Police! police! help! help! this man's Gunston, the Vauxhall Junction murderer!"

Otway, glancing down—the fellow only reached to his shoulder—perceived that this was a case for instant measures, or none. Seizing him by the throat, tearing him loose—the man was like a child in his clutch—he drove him right through the plate-glass window of the shop in front of which they were standing, turning just in time to receive the driver of the hansom.

"So it's going to be like that!" cried Jehu.

"I think you'll find that it is."

The cabman understanding, a trifle too late, that it was just possible that he had met more than his match, tried to avoid the other's rush. In vain. Otway, striking him full in the face, sent him crashing backwards against his horse. The astonished creature, unaccustomed to be used as a target, reared. The cabman dropped beneath it. A circumstance which, not unnaturally, completed the animal's confusion. It bolted. Otway did not stop to see if it went over his own driver. He himself tore off at the top of his speed. Instinctively he swerved round the first turning to which he came; presently round a second. Shortly he realised that there seemed only one pursuer, a man who kept by his side as if he were running well within his pace. He turned to look at him, only to dimly perceive that he was a white-faced fellow, with curious eyes.

"If you'll take good advice, my man, you'll sheer off, or you may get hurt."

The other, seeming not at all disconcerted, replied, in a voice which was unpleasantly husky:

"Don't you be afraid of me, old pal, I'm not going to set the coppers on to you. It's the other way about—they'd like you to set them on to me. I'm a friend in need, that's what I am. I'll take you to a crib where all the coppers in London won't be able to find you. This way."

Otway had not the faintest notion where he was, nor which way to turn to elude pursuit. There was no time for reflection. It was a case of Hobson's choice. At any moment the hunt might come in sight. The speaker swung round still another corner. Otway followed. Round again. Otway stuck to his heels. They were now in what appeared to be an alley leading down to the river. The runner, pausing in front of a

closed door, opened it by some means which Otway did not understand.

"This is my place, and I tell you that all the coppers in London won't find you here. In you go!"

Otway, accepting the invitation, stepped inside. The other, following, closed the door. They were in pitch blackness. The stranger struck a match. By its light it was seen that they were in a narrow passage. The stranger led the way along it to a door at the end, which he also opened. As he did so the match went out.

"Stop where you are for half-a-mo'. I've got a lamp inside. I'll light it, and then we'll see what we are doing. There's no one in the place but you and me." He did as he said he would, the lighted lamp showing that he had passed through the door into a room beyond. "Come right in, and shut the door after you." Otway obeyed, finding himself in a fairly spacious low-ceilinged apartment. You needn't be afraid of any coppers finding you here, they couldn't do it, or they'd have found me long ago. You look a bit puffed. There's a chair. You'd better get your breath."

He pointed to a large leather-covered armchair. Otway, unaccustomed to running, did feel as if he had had enough of it. A little rest would do him good. He sat down in the chair. As he did so there was a clicking sound, something forced him right against the back of the chair. He seemed, all at once, to be surrounded by iron bands, which held him as in a vice.

For a second or two he had not even an inkling of what had really happened, imagining that the piece of furniture being of a weakly constitution serious injuries had resulted from his sitting on it. It was only after a little quiet contemplation that he understood that by placing himself upon the seat he had freed some ingenious springs, which were holding him pinioned in a chair which was fastened to the ground. Movement was impossible: he could not have been more helpless if he had been swathed in fifty yards of steel wire. The ingenuity of the trap, the ease with which it had been worked, appealed to his grim sense of humour. He smiled.

"Very neat."

"Not bad, is it? My own invention. It's only natural that a parent should be proud of his own child, especially since

I put it together with my own fingers. Although I have taken out no patent, nor even applied for provisional protection, and have had no opportunity to place it on the market, it has already repaid me pretty well—on the whole."

"What's the idea?"

"The idea? Oh,—robbery, and other things."

"You're a nice sort of scoundrel."

"In the matter of scoundrelism you and I are in the same boat, aren't we? You practise on your own lines, I on mine. In any case, I don't see, Mr Gunston, what you have to complain of, even supposing you to be of a complaining turn of mind. They would have hung you if they had pinched you, and they would have pinched you if I had not come to your assistance. I undertook to take you to a crib where the coppers would not find you; you may rest assured that they will not find you here."

"And how long do you propose to keep me—in this haven of refuge?"

"The phrase is nicely chosen. I really, however, could not tell you on the spur of the moment. You see, it depends upon what I do with you—afterwards."

"Afterwards?"

"Yes—afterwards." The look by which it was accompanied enveloped the word in a sinister atmosphere. The speaker continued: "Have a cigarette? They're cheap—ten a penny—but not on that account necessarily bad. It is not always the most expensive cigarettes which make the nicest smoking."

He held out a paper packet of cigarettes.

"No, thank you."

"Then I will, with your very kind permission. I'm a victim of the cigarette microbe. Sometimes I get through half-a-dozen packets in a day."

He lighted one, with what struck Otway as being an assumption of extravagant ease. He himself was enduring tortures, as he proceeded to point out:

"These—arrangements of yours are cutting me like so many knives."

"That's because you had your arms at your sides as you were sitting down. They were snapped with the rest of your body: the consequence being an increase of pressure. Generally my clients' arms are left outside. They have to be dealt with separately."

"If this continues much longer I shall have to—faint."

"By all means faint, if you think it will relieve you. I daresay you're feeling pretty bad. I notice that there is what looks like perspiration on your forehead, which can hardly be induced by the heat of the room. In any case, it doesn't matter; I shall have to chloroform you anyhow."

"You—beauty!"

"I am an excellent example of the truly masculine—am I not? Your appreciation is valued at its proper worth." He produced a bottle and some cotton waste from a cupboard. "In applying chloroform I mostly use cotton waste. Some people have a notion that you have only to apply chloroform to a man's nose and he succumbs at once. I need not tell you what a mistake that is. To do any real good it must be inhaled into the lungs. That takes time. Some folks, in fact, it scarcely affects. We'll hope that with you I shall have better luck. Indeed, from the look of you I fancy that I shall. Practice has given me rather an expert eye. But before we proceed to that part of our little business——"

From the same cupboard he took another bottle and a glass.

"I will drink nothing of yours."

"Oh yes, you will; because if you don't drink what I am about to offer you voluntarily and with a good grace, I shall have to put a funnel down your throat, and get it into your stomach that way. You see, the anæsthetic will have but a transitory influence. It is essential that I should have you in a comatose condition for, say, at least three or four days. This skilfully-compounded liquid to which I am about to call your particular attention will manage that very nicely. Now, are you ready?"

He had poured out three parts of a tumblerful of what looked like muddy port, with which he advanced towards the man in the chair. Otway regarded it intently.

"Is it—death?"

"No; it is not death. It is simply a long, and we will hope refreshing, sleep."

"Refreshing! There is not much refreshment to be derived from that sort of thing."

"Frankly, there is not. I was merely expressing a pious aspiration. I thought it might please you. One can never tell."

"What is the stuff?"

"Ah, now you are asking too many questions. Doctors do not disclose the secrets of their compounds. Let us call it a little panacea of my own."

"And I am to drink it?"

"You are."

"And if I won't?"

"Well—you will—in my way, instead of your own. Have you ever seen them fattening chickens by artificial processes? If you are—cantankerous, it will be injected into your stomach exactly as food is injected into a chicken's gullet."

"I suppose I am wholly at your mercy."

"You state the position accurately."

"You—veritable friend in need!"

"Mr Gunston, what kind of a friend in need does a man of your type look for? On the one side you could have, for a friend, the hangman; on the other—me. You have chosen me. Candidly, I think you have made the better choice. You can hardly be in a worse plight; and those bank-notes which you were about to offer to the driver of that hansom cab might as well be in my possession as in his."

"So it's the bank-notes you are after."

"Certainly; what else?"

"Then why not take them and let me go? let me get out of this seat of—the torments of the damned?"

"Mr Gunston, you are not reasonable. To whom should I let you go? To the police? Don't you know that they are scouring every lane and alley for you, probably assisted by a crowd of persons who would use you very badly if they once got you in their hands? Besides, you might tell them of the friend in need; men have done all sorts of things to curry favour. Then they might want to hang me many times over, which I should not like. No; to talk of letting you go is absurd. I never let any one go who has once sat in that chair. And they have been many. As for getting out of that seat, you have only to drink this. Within a very few moments I shall use the chloroform. Sometimes I wait to see if it is necessary, but, in your case, I promise that I won't. And, immediately afterwards, you will be out of that seat."

"How can I hold a glass to drink when my hands are being severed from my wrists?"

"You need not hold the glass—I will perform that office

for you. Put your head back, open your mouth, I will hold it to your lips."

Otway did as he was bid; in addition, he shut his eyes. The man assisted him to drink with a neatness which suggested that he was used to similar ministrations. Presently Otway stopped swallowing.

"It hasn't a nice taste."

"No, perhaps not. Still, it's as nice as you could expect. Finish it up."

"Must I drink it all?"

"Every drop."

Otway swallowed what was left in the glass, leaving what looked like a layer of mud at the bottom.

"There are still the dregs, but we'll say nothing of those. How do you feel?"

"In hell."

"That's natural."

He emptied part of the contents of the first bottle on to a quantity of cotton waste. This he pressed against Otway's nose and mouth. Mr Otway's body heaved and writhed as if convulsively. Then he was still.

CHAPTER V

THE QUEEN OF THE SEAS

WHEN, after his encounter with that friend in need, George Otway returned to life his first hazy impression was that the world must be coming to an end. Not only was he surrounded by extraordinary noises, but he seemed, without any effort on his own part, to be performing a series of complicated somersaults. By degrees he realised not only that these things were taking place in an atmosphere of gloom, but, also, that his nostrils were being greeted by a very peculiar smell. Later it dawned upon him that he was in a recumbent position. Endeavouring to sit up he struck his head against something which was immediately above with such force that he fell back, half stunned. As he lay trying to collect his thoughts it seemed to him that he was lying in what was apparently a narrow box, which was closed on three sides, and open on the fourth. Carefully protruding his head on the open side he began to try to make out the meaning of it all. A voice saluted him:

"Hollo, mate, coming out of it, are you? About time, too, I should say. You must have lowered it by pailfuls."

In the dim light Otway perceived that a man was seated on a stool, clad in his shirt and socks. He was holding a pair of trousers, on which he seemed to be adjusting a patch.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Bill Stone, that's who I am; with thanks for kind inquiries."

"Where am I?"

"Ah, I thought that'd be the next question. I've been asked it many a time by chaps like you, and have always been pleased to give the information required. You're aboard the *Queen of the Seas*, that's where you are."

A glimmer of light began to reach Otway's perception.

"The *Queen of the Seas*? It's a ship!"

"Right you are; very well said; a ship it is. Did you suppose it was a motor car?"

"But—how did I come on board a ship?"

"Ah, there you are again. As it happens, there's one or two besides yourself on this ship as would like to know how they come to be aboard. I take it that sherbet brought 'em half the way and crimps the rest."

"Crimps?"

In spite of what seemed to be his splitting head his thoughts recurred to the white-faced, queer-eyed friend in need. Had he drugged and robbed and crimped him too? In the present year of grace could such things be?

"But there aren't any crimps to-day?"

"Aren't there? Where might you happen to have been brought up? Somewhere where there wasn't any salt water?"

"But—I'm not a sailor."

"Before you get off this boat I lay you will be. There's chaps aboard her as would make a sailor out of a pair of clothes-pegs."

Perceiving that the apparent box was, in reality, a berth, Otway had clambered out of it—awkwardly enough—and was now endeavouring to keep his footing on the uneasy floor. A heavy tread was heard descending steps without. Mr Stone listened for a moment, then turned to Otway with a grin:

"Here's some one coming who'll start making a sailor of you right away."

A man appeared in the doorway who was so enveloped in oilskins as to make it impossible to see what sort of person was underneath them. It was, however, immediately made plain that, while in stature he was below the average height, in voice he was monstrous. He addressed himself to Otway as if he were shouting to a person who was a mile away:

"So you're not dead, are'nt you? Lucky for you you've found it out. I've just come down to tell 'em to throw you overboard. We carry no dead meat aboard this craft, and so I'll quickly larn you. Up you go on deck, you skulking lubber." Uncertain, for the moment, whether these remarks were being hurled at him Otway stared at the newcomer in bewildered surprise, a bearing which the other promptly resented: "Don't stand there staring at me like a stuck pig, you somethinged scoundrel! up you go!"

"May I ask who you are and who you imagine yourself to be addressing?"

Had he worked a miracle Otway could hardly have created a greater impression on the figure in the oilskins. He was hazily conscious of so much, just as he was becoming aware of the fact that the cabin was much larger than he had at first supposed, and that heads were peeping out of some of the numerous berths which lined the sides. Then ensued an interval of what — so far as the stranger was concerned — seemed to be petrified amazement; then a volley of imprecations:

"What the somethinged, somethinged something do you mean by speaking to me like that? Up you go, before I strip the skin right off you!"

The speaker advanced towards Otway with a belaying pin in his hand.

"Let me recommend you to be careful what you do or say. I am not the person you appear to take me for. You may be an officer of this ship, but I certainly am not one of the crew."

"You something, somethinged scoundrel, I'll learn you what you are!"

Each adjective was pointed by a blow from the belaying pin. Otway, ill, dizzy, taken unawares, went down like a ninepin. Not satisfied with knocking him over, his assailant proceeded to kick him with his heavy boots, continuing his flow of adjectives unceasingly. This kind of treatment had a tonic effect upon George Otway. Forgetting his own illness, scrambling to his feet, wresting the weapon from his assailant's hand, he proceeded to shake him with a degree of vigour which was sufficiently surprising in a man who had only just returned to consciousness. Presently he ceased, explaining why he did so:

"It is only because I am pretty sure that you don't know what it is that you are doing that I refrain from wringing your neck. I repeat the advice which I gave you just now: be careful."

The man was apparently so astounded by Otway's behaviour as to be temporarily bereft of the power of articulate speech. When it returned to him he gave a great gasp as if for breath:

"Mutiny!—mutiny!—I'll pay you for that!"

The words were yelled rather than spoken, and were scarcely clear of his lips when he had rushed out of the cabin, and was heard stamping up the companion-way. Immediately

the peeping heads became more apparent; there was a chorus of voices:

"Now you've done it!"

"I wouldn't be in your shoes for twelve months' pay!"

"They'll iron you as sure as you're living!"

"Shouldn't be surprised if they were to flog you out of hand!"

"Who is he?" demanded Otway.

"He's Benjamin Slacke, that's who he is, the third mate. If he were captain he couldn't think more of himself—the dirty skunk! If you'd killed him out of hand you might be talking. It wouldn't have been no worse for you if you had. Here he comes back again. If you ain't more than half the fool you seem to be you'll just knock under without giving any more trouble: he's got his knife into you enough already."

The infuriated mate had returned with reinforcements in the shape of two men who were enshrouded, like himself, in oilskins. He hounded them on to their prey:

"There he is! On deck with him! If he gives you any trouble, over with him, and haul him up by his heels!"

The two men moved towards Otway, showing in their demeanour a plentiful lack of that eagerness which the mate would plainly have liked them to exhibit. The manner in which their quarry addressed them seemed to add—if it were possible—another shade of discretion to their bearing:

"I am perfectly willing to accompany you, my men. There is not the slightest necessity for you to attempt rough handling."

They did not attempt rough handling. On the contrary, each taking an arm, they marched with Otway towards the companion with what almost amounted to a show of positive friendship, the mate yelling at them as they went:

"Don't you wear no kid gloves, you chaps! over with him if he moves a finger."

When they reached the deck the fresh air commenced to do George Otway good. The ship was steaming through drenching rain in half-a-gale of wind. The salt spray dashing against his face, the rain descending on his uncovered head, served as a finer pick-me-up than anything else could have done. As, with some difficulty, they made their way across the slippery, heaving deck, Otway's brain began to clear, his

spirits to rise,—and that in spite of the adjectival mate, who still stuck close to their heels. The procession mounted to the hurricane deck, where they found two men encased in the inevitable oilskins. One of them, from the mate's manner, Otway judged to be the captain. He was a big, burly man, with a weather-beaten face, and an iron-grey beard. The other was a slight, sallow man, with a huge moustache; unmistakably a foreigner. The mate told his tale.

"Here's the fellow of whom I told you, sir, that skulker. I've got him out of his berth at last, but when I ordered him up on deck he not only refused to go, but struck me."

"Struck you, did he. You're a pretty sort."

This remark was addressed to Otway, whom he favoured with a stare which was scarcely genial. Otway had, all at once, became aware that now, if ever, was the time to extricate himself from what promised to be a very disagreeable situation.

"May I inquire if you're the captain of this ship?"

On hearing the tone in which the inquiry was put the grey-bearded man perceptibly started; while his companion, wheeling half round, regarded the speaker with what seemed a new and singular interest.

"I am the captain of this ship. I am Captain Thomson Page, at your service. Is there any other information with which I can favour you?"

Although the intention was sarcastic Otway choose to take the words as seriously meant:

"There is a good deal more information which I should like to have. I should like to know how I came on board this ship, since I certainly am not here of my own free will. I have been drugged, robbed, and apparently crimped; but I can assure you I am no sailor."

"No sailor, aren't you? I've shipped a good many that weren't, but you're the first who's been frank enough to own it. What's your name?"

"George Otway."

A correction came from the mate.

"His name's Bob Brown, sir; it's on his papers."

"Bob Brown? Then what do you mean by calling yourself George Otway?"

"Because I am George Otway. I do not know what the papers are to which this person refers, but they have nothing to do with me."

The sallow man asked a question, with an obvious sneer:

"Are you any relation to George Otway, the millionaire?"

"I am he."

The assurance with which the words were uttered seemed to take the sallow man aback. His sneer increased in intensity:

"Come, my friend, that's a trifle too steep, since, as all the world knows, George Otway happens to be dead."

"All the world thinks it knows, but it doesn't. The body found in the river was another individual's altogether. I tell you I am George Otway; if you will put me within reach of a telegraph office I will prove it to your entire satisfaction."

"Then how come you to be on board the *Queen of the Seas*?"

"That is a point on which others may be able to afford you more information than I can. I can only repeat that I have been drugged, robbed, and, it seems, crimped; all offences which may turn out to have very serious consequences for all those who may be even remotely concerned in them."

The sallow man, taking the captain on one side, exchanged a few sentences with him in private, then he returned to Otway:

"If there is any truth in what you say, there is some one on board who, I think, you may find not unwilling to befriend you. Only look out that it is not all lies, or I am very sure that that same person will make you sorry."

"What I have told you is the simple truth."

"Very good; so long as you stick to the simple truth you'll find it's all right. Come with me."

The sallow man led the way to a good-sized, well-furnished cabin on the first deck. As they went he asked three or four questions which showed so intimate a knowledge of certain commercial transactions in which Otway had been engaged that the millionaire, on his side, began to be curious as to who his companion might chance to be. That his own answers carried some sort of conviction to the inquirer's mind was sufficiently obvious. The cabin was in the occupation of a lady who was seated behind a table on which there were a number of papers. The sallow man addressed her:

"Miss Thornton, I am going to speak to Donna Luisa. May I leave this person here in your custody until I return?"

The lady nodded. The speaker passed through a door

which was at the other side of the cabin. Otway was left alone with the lady. The position was unlooked for. He felt uncomfortable. He was attired in a variety of odds and ends, which were not only dirty, but had been made for a person of an entirely different figure, besides being so ragged as to be scarcely decent. He was hatless and shoeless; conscious that his hair and beard were, to say the least, unkempt; while his whole person stood in instant need of a plentiful supply of soap and water. The lady in front of him was young and pleasant-looking, and as neatly dressed as if she had just come out of a West End drawing-room. There was something in the eyes with which she was regarding him which made Otway feel as if he would like to sink through the floor with shame. When she spoke her voice was clear and melodious:

"What have you been doing?"

"I fear that it is not so much a question of what I have been doing as of what has been done to me."

The words he used, the tones in which they were uttered, coming from such a figure as he presented, seemed to fill her with surprise.

"Done to you? What do you mean? Aren't you one of the crew?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief I am not. I assuredly am no sailor. Until within the last few minutes I was not aware that I was on a ship at all."

"But—I don't understand."

"Nor I. It is an understanding I am hoping to arrive at, with the assistance of that gentleman who has just gone out."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I trust I am. I was tolerably sure of it until—recently."

"Then why are you wearing such clothes?"

"That is part of the wonder. I can only assure you that they are not my own. May I ask you a question in my turn? To what port is the *Queen of the Seas*—which I understand is the name of the vessel—bound!"

"Ah, there you have touched upon a mystery. I am not certain; but I fear that wherever we are bound we are on a voyage which bodes no good to any one."

"You don't know to what port the ship on which you are travelling is bound! How comes that about? Does she carry passengers or merchandise?"

"She carries passengers, of a sort, and merchandise of a

still worse sort. As appears to have been the case with you, I am in a position which it was far from my intention to occupy. Therefore all the information which I am able to give to any one is only of the very vaguest kind. They tell me nothing, or, at anyrate, as little as they possibly can. Here comes the Mother of Caracas."

What she meant Otway had not the faintest notion. He only perceived that the words were accompanied with what seemed to him to be a mischievous smile. The lady rose; the door behind her opened. There entered, first, the man who had just passed through, and then so extraordinary a figure that for a second or two Otway hardly knew what to make of it. It was that of a woman, who made up in bulk what she lacked in height. Although not more than five feet six or seven, she probably weighed twenty stone, a fact which was accentuated by her costume. Although it was broad daylight, she wore an evening dress, which was cut even indecorously low, of bright crimson satin. Across the body was a broad ribbon of green velvet, worn as if it were an order. The bosom of her dress was plastered over with ribbons, medals, stars, crosses, and what looked like curiosities in the way of charms. About her bovine neck was a necklace of what might have been diamonds. On her head was an article which resembled a turban, which again was ornamented with what, quite possibly, were jewels. More startling attire for a woman to wear while it was yet daylight, on board ship in a high sea, it would be difficult to conceive. She, herself, did not appear to be conscious of the slightest incongruity, but looked about her as she entered, as if confident of receiving the admiration of any one whose glance she might encounter.

Her face suggested qualities which ill accorded with the absurdities of her general appearance. Her age was about forty. Her hair, which was yet black, curled naturally, reminiscent of something negroid. Her eyes were bright and resolute and cruel. Her mouth seemed to open and shut like a rat trap, and to be suggestive of as much feeling. She had a square jaw, and not only a flourishing moustache, but also the promise of a beard. On the whole, Otway thought he had never seen a woman towards whom, at first sight, he felt himself less drawn. She eyed Miss Thornton, who was still standing, with a look which was not redolent of the milk of human kindness.

"I don't want you. You can go." The girl inclined her head and went out of the door through which the crimson lady had just come in. "She gets more and more in the way. I wish I'd never brought her."

This postscript was added while the girl was still going, in tones which hinted that it was meant to reach her ears. The sallow man—who had removed his oilskins so as to disclose a tweed suit of a peculiar shade of brown which went badly with his complexion—shrugged his shoulders.

"It was necessary."

"Necessary? Bah! Nothing's necessary that doesn't please me."

The crimson lady seated herself on the chair which Miss Thornton had just vacated. Producing a cigar-case from some receptacle in the bosom of her dress, out of it she took a cigar. Putting the end between her large, yellow, irregular teeth, she bit it off. The sallow man proffered a lighted match, which she suffered him to hold while she got the tobacco into going order. All the time she never moved her eyes from Otway, who, on his part, was observing her with increasing amazement. After two or three puffs at her cigar she spoke, in perfect English, though with a marked foreign accent.:

"So you're George Otway."

"I am."

"What was the name of the person who came to you with a proposition for the consolidation of the Uruguayan debt?"

Otway started. The proposition in question—which had been of a sufficiently nefarious kind—could only have been known to a small, and very remarkable, coterie.

"He called himself Edouard Dufond."

The man and woman exchanged glances.

"You refused to entertain his proposition?"

"I did."

"Should you still refuse if it were made to you a second time?"

"Unhesitatingly."

"It will not be made. Have no fear." A silent puff or two at the cigar. "If you are George Otway, how come you to be on board my ship?"

He explained so far as he was able; the woman's steadfast glances suggesting that she was trying to read his mind rather

than listening to his words. When he had finished she flicked the end off her cigar.

"So they took you for a murderer. That was funny."

"It might have been."

"And your family think that you are dead. Suppose I allow them to continue to think that you are dead?—that might pay me very well."

"I don't see how."

"Perhaps not. On the other hand, suppose I let them know you are alive, but express my willingness to arrange that you shall continue dead to them—that might pay me even better, eh? Now you understand?"

"I should prefer to think I misunderstood."

"You are a diplomatist. However, you will see that you are in my hands. You tell me a tale, which may be true, but of which I have no proof. You are entered on the ship's books as one of the crew. As such it seems that you have already struck your superior officer. I am free to put you in irons, and worse. If, instead, I accept your statements, and treat you as you claim to be entitled to be treated, I shall be doing you a service which it would be impossible to exaggerate. What service would you render me in return?"

"You would not find me ungrateful, nor backward in doing all that an honest man could do."

"So? Not so much emphasis upon the honest. Some men's sense of honesty is so much greater than their sense of gratitude, which, in your case, might be awkward. But I will trust you, Mr Otway, since I do not believe you are a dog of that breed. I will believe all that you say, and treat you as my friend. Do not let me regret it. Bianchi, see that Mr Otway is provided with a change of wardrobe at once. I shall look forward to the pleasure of seeing you at my table at dinner."

She waved her cigar with a gesture which implied dismissal. The sallow man, crossing to him, held the door open, waiting for him to pass through it first.

"I shall have pleasure, Mr Otway, in placing at your disposition all the resources of the ship."

So soon as they were out of the cabin he slipped his arm through his, with a show of friendship which Mr Otway did not altogether relish.

"You are much to be congratulated, Mr Otway. Although

that lady has a tender heart she has her moments of severity. Had you found her in one of them she might have taken a different view of the position. You are most fortunate."

"I am glad you think so. May I ask what is the lady's name?"

"She would probably prefer to give you herself all the information on that subject which you have a right to demand. Let me recommend you, while you are on this ship, not to ask any questions; on the *Queen of the Seas* they are not encouraged. Here is the cabin which I will give instructions to have placed exclusively at your disposition. I think you will find that it already contains all that you require. Therefore, until dinner, Mr Otway."

CHAPTER VI

THE MOTHER OF CARACAS

MR OTWAY found himself in the sole possession of what was apparently a small state-room. An open-fitted dressing-case was on a chair, off which it bade fair each moment to plump on to the floor. A pink print shirt, of a somewhat pronounced hue, was on the bed. Beside it was what seemed to be an officer's uniform.

"What's this? It rather recalls the full-dress glories of the Mulligan Guards. Shade of Botticelli, what a green! It's own brother to the velvet band which that dear woman wore across her generous chest. Am I supposed to put this on?" It seemed that he was, since there was nothing else in the shape of outer garments to be seen. "Is this that gentleman's idea of all that I require? If I get inside these clothes I shall never dare to show my face for fear of being taken for something novel in Guy Fauxes."

The result, however, when he was inside them, though a little striking, was not so bad as he might have feared. To begin with, the clothes were not at all a bad fit; while his unusual height enabled him to carry off the too vivid shade of green better than a smaller man might have done.

"Anyhow," he admitted, "I'm looking an improvement on what I was, as I think Miss Thornton would admit. By the way, I wonder who she is. The dear lady in the crimson satin seemed to treat her as if she were something inferior in door-mats. I also wonder what regiment this brilliant thing in uniforms is intended to adorn. I do not wish to figure as an officer of the Bounding Blackguards."

He remained in his cabin till the sallow gentleman re-appeared, this time arrayed in a uniform which was the facsimile of his own. The spectacle which Otway presented filled him with enthusiasm.

"Ah, my friend, but what a difference! How superb an alteration! Who would have imagined that the man of rags

and tatters could so quickly be transformed into this figure of supreme distinction! Permit me, my dear Otway, to be the first to welcome you as a companion-in-arms."

He held out his hand, which the other took in what was, perhaps, a rather more strenuous grasp than he had intended.

"Thank you. I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure. I've not the faintest notion of what it is you mean, but perhaps all that is coming later."

"All that, as you say, is coming later." Mr Bianchi was examining the hand which Otway had released, with a degree of attention which suggested anxiety as to the condition it was in. "You have a strong grip, my friend. You should remember that all men are not giants. Come, they will be awaiting us."

He led the way to a saloon which Otway was not altogether surprised to find was already in the occupation of a number of individuals who were in uniforms which, in all essentials, were identical with the one he himself was wearing. Bianchi introduced them formally, one by one, though in no case did he succeed in catching a name. They were apparently of all nationalities. The English of some was bad to the point of unintelligibility; others seemed to have none at all. Otway felt that he had never before found himself in the centre of so undesirable looking a crowd. One person in particular—an elderly man with only one eye, whose display of gold lace pointed to his being some one in authority—had about him that furtive, hang-dog expression which one associates with the habitual criminal.

Presently the portly lady entered—still in the crimson satin—with Miss Thornton at her heels. Taking her seat in the centre of one side of the long table, she signified to Otway that she wished him to take the seat at her side. Observing that Miss Thornton was moving towards one end, he stood for her to be seated. The portly lady looked up:

"Why don't you sit down, Mr Otway? For what are you standing?"

"I was waiting for Miss Thornton to have found a chair."

"Miss Thornton? Do you know Miss Thornton? Miss Thornton is my maid. It does not please me that any one should pay attention to my maid."

Otway did not believe that Miss Thornton was her maid—at least, in the sense she intended to convey—though he could

not help but notice that he was the only one who had remained on his feet while she was looking for an unoccupied chair. The words had been uttered in a tone which was audible all over the saloon. Miss Thornton had found a seat on the same side as that on which he sat, so that she was invisible from where he was. But he observed that more than one man looked in her direction with a grin for which he would have liked to call him to account.

Possibly with the portly lady it was one of these moments of severity of which her friend Bianchi had spoken. Possibly, also, she had observed that her right-hand neighbour made no attempt to conceal the fact that her remark was very little to his taste. However that may have been, the dinner proved to be as unsociable an entertainment as any at which Otway had ever assisted—and that was saying not a little. The portly lady seemed to be in bad temper. Although she did not say much, what she did say was of so disagreeable a nature that it would have added to the general comfort if she had said less. Every one present seemed to hold her in awe. Here and there an attempt was made to converse in whispers; but after she had peremptorily commanded two murmuring mulattoes not to make a noise silence reigned. When the repast had come to a conclusion she delivered herself of an observation which put a final damper on any tendency to high spirits which might still have been existing. To make sure of being understood by every one she repeated it in Spanish:

"Gentlemen, on leaving the table you will all of you be so good as to retire to your own cabins, and to remain in them. To-night I wish for perfect quiet. It is to me a solemn occasion."

What she meant by her closing reference Otway had not a notion. Judging from the expression which was on the faces of the assembled company, he doubted if any one else had, either. What measure of obedience others might be disposed to render was to him a matter of indifference. He himself was inclined to obey, and that for the sufficient reason that, at the moment, he preferred his own society to that of any one he saw about him. A talk with Miss Thornton he would have liked to have had, but as it seemed to him that that might be difficult of attainment the pleasure of anybody else's conversation was one which he was perfectly willing to forgo.

None the less, he had not returned to the exclusive enjoyment

of his own cabin for many minutes before he had had enough of it. Although of fair dimensions, it seemed stifling. He longed for air. The wind had fallen; the vessel was riding on a more even keel. He fancied the rain had ceased. At least there would not be much harm in going to see.

So he went.

He was right: the rain had ceased. On deck it was gloriously fine. The waves had still their caps on; but the moon looked out in splendour from among packs of light, fleecy clouds which went flying across the sky. He strolled round the nearly deserted decks, conscious that curious eyes were peeping at him as he passed. Returning towards the poop he became aware of voices speaking. One was a woman's—Miss Thornton's. Although she was not talking loudly it struck Otway that there was anger, almost fear, in her accents. The other was a man's—an unknown man's. His tones, which were harsh and rasping, suggested mingled threats and cajolery. Suddenly there was an unmistakable exclamation from the lady:

"Stand farther off! don't dare to touch me!" And the man's reply:

"Don't you be a fool!"

Otway advanced, to find the lady engaged in what looked very like a struggle with the evil-faced, one-eyed gentleman, whose uniform was adorned with such a profusion of gold lace. With scant ceremony Otway took him by the shoulder and moved him farther from the lady. He glared up at the newcomer in surprise and wrath.

"What do you mean by that, you—idiot? Didn't you hear the orders, that you were not to leave your cabin?"

"I fancied they applied equally to all of us. Why are you out? Since you appear to have been already enjoying the evening breezes for some little time, perhaps you won't object to my appreciating them for a while in my turn."

After momentary hesitation the elderly gentleman walked away without another word. When he had gone Miss Thornton turned to Otway. There was a tremor in her voice as she spoke:

"Now you've made another enemy."

"And perhaps, also, another friend."

"But, in any case, how powerful an emeny and how insignificant a friend!"

"I am not so sure of the friend's insignificance."

"That is because you do not understand. I see you have been promoted."

"If a passage from one person's rags to another person's fancy dress means promotion! But what is the meaning of it all—of the comic opera uniforms, the strange company? Who is the lady who issues her orders to us as if we were so many dogs?"

"For all information on that point I must again refer you to her. I only know what she has told me, which amounts to nothing."

"But—if that is so—how do you come to be on board—one woman among all these men?"

"That is what I ask myself; and yet it is very simple. I saw an advertisement stating that a lady was required as companion to another lady who was going yachting. Very liberal terms were offered. I applied for the post. My application was accepted. It was only after I was on board that I began to realise what an odd yacht the *Queen of the Seas* was; and what a peculiar lady I was to accompany. Already, you see, she announces that I am her maid."

"But does she treat you in private as if you were?"

"Not she. She does not extend to me so much of her confidence. Her maid is an old black woman who does not speak a word of English. I imagine that, before she started, she thought that she would like to have another woman on board as a sort of chaperon. Now, perceiving that that idea was a mistake, she would like to drop me overboard, and I am beginning to feel that I shouldn't mind if she did."

"Miss Thornton!"

"If you will reflect for a moment you will perceive in what an undesirable position I am placed. Most of the 'gentlemen' on board are—I will say it—nothing more than the sweepings of the gutters. There are many things less endurable than—a grave in the sea."

While Otway was considering what answer to make Bianchi's figure intruded itself between them. He favoured the lady with a glance which the other instinctively resented; his tone was hard and dry.

"Miss Thornton, Donna Luisa requires you in her cabin—at once."

In silence the girl turned to go. Otway turned also.

"With your permission, Miss Thornton, I will accompany you to the cabin."

Bianchi touched him on the arm.

"Let Miss Thornton go by herself, if you please." A request which the girl herself echoed, with an appeal in her eyes.

"Please stay!"

So soon as she had left them Otway said to his companion, who still kept a detaining hand upon his arm:

"I am so fortunate as to have been able to render a slight service to Miss Thornton. I have been able to relieve her from the insolent attentions of a person with one eye. Since you appear to be in authority I would recommend you to say a word or two of warning to the individual in question before it is too late."

The reply was not encouraging:

"Considering the circumstances under which you find yourself on this vessel, Mr Otway, you assume a singular tone. Did you not understand that you were commanded not to leave your cabin to-night?"

"I object to the word you use, Mr Bianchi—the word, command; since there is certainly no one on this ship to whom I owe obedience."

"You are very unwise to talk like that, Mr Otway, and very ungrateful. Fortunately, I am the only person who hears you. You will find, if you are not careful, that there is a person on board this ship who has both the right and the power to command your obedience. I do not wish to enter into any discussion. Let me desire you to retire to your cabin now."

For some seconds Mr Otway was in two minds. He did not intend, he told himself, to be dragooned by a person who looked like an Italian organ-grinder. But prudence prevailed; he did as he was told.

The following day he spent partly in his cabin, partly in wandering over the ship—so far, that is, as he was suffered to wander, for he soon discovered that there were rules and regulations which were as incomprehensible as they were Draconian. There was, for instance, an objection to the persons whom he had seen assembled in the saloon on the previous night appearing too frequently, or too numerously, on any of the decks. There seemed to be a desire on the

part of some one to keep the fact that there were so many persons on board as quiet as possible. The consequence being that, except by the sailors, the upper parts of the vessel seemed deserted.

Towards evening Bianchi appeared in the door of his cabin.

"You are to dine alone with Donna Luisa in her private saloon, Mr Otway. I imagine that she may lay before you certain propositions to which you will be well advised if you accede. I would remind you of what I told you yesterday: that while she has a tender heart, she has her moments of severity. You blundered on one of those moments last night. You will find it in every way to your advantage to meet, without hesitation, her very reasonable wishes."

The private saloon in question turned out to be the cabin in which he had first seen Miss Thornton. Here he found a table laid for two persons, and the lady herself, still attired in the preposterous crimson satin, awaiting his arrival.

"You are a little late, Mr Otway. Is it your custom to allow ladies to attend your pleasure?"

He bowed, and said nothing. The spectacle she presented so jarred on his nerves as to drive out of his mind any excuse which might have been lying handy. She seemed not to object to his silence, or, possibly, was too fond of the sound of her own voice to notice it. Her manner was affability itself, or, rather, it was probably intended to be such. Throughout the meal she kept up a ceaseless flow of chatter on all sorts of subjects, in which she appeared to require no assistance from him. But when the actual repast was at an end, and she had lighted not only her own cigar but his as well, and they were alone together, her manner underwent a sudden and singular change.

"Now, Mr Otway, we will come to business, you and I. We have had enough of gossip for a while. Let us be frank together. It is better to be frank, eh?"

"There are occasions when frankness is desirable—perfect frankness."

"There shall be perfect frankness between us two, that I promise. So it seems that you do not remember me. Yet you did business with my husband."

"Your husband?"

"My husband was Don John D'Agostino, the immortal President of the Republic of Caracas."

Then Otway remembered. It all came back to him on the instant. How the discredited old ruffian had offered to sell his country for a song, and how he had refused his overtures with scorn. And that was what she called doing business with her husband! Behind her cigar she was watching him attentively.

"I perceive that now your memory returns to you."

It did, with a rush; especially as regards incidents in her career which had reached him through channels of which she had no notion.

"You remember, no doubt, the whole tragic story. How my revered husband—beloved by every creature in Caracas—becoming the victim of a nest of serpents, was driven from the country for which he had done so much, and how, in that moment of distress, I became the sharer of his exile—I, the Mother of Caracas. As the whole universe is aware, by that title of supreme affection and respect I was known to every person in the country."

That she had been known as the "Mother of Caracas" he was aware; the "whole tragic story," as she phrased it, came back to him. But he also knew that the title had been conferred on her in something more than derision. Even in that country of easy morals her conduct had been a mock and a byword. She continued, in apparently sublime unconsciousness of what was passing through his mind:

"While my husband still lived all Caracas continually cried for his—for our—return. Now that he is gone it cries to me—to me alone!—with a cry so loud, so penetrating, so insistent, that I can no longer refuse to hear. So I am returning to the land which seeks its Mother. You understand?"

"In other words, this is a little filibustering expedition on which you are engaged. With its objective?"

"The Presidency of Caracas—nothing less."

"And you are of opinion that that objective will be attained?"

Leaning over the table she touched his arm with the butt of her cigar.

"I am of opinion that it is certain—with your assistance."

"With my assistance?"

"Ah, my dear friend, we know—you and I—that you are a very rich man. I understand that you can write a cheque for millions."

"Any one can write a cheque for billions. Whether it will be honoured is quite another thing."

"But in your case it will be honoured—there is the point. It is in this way: a miracle has thrown us together. Let us go a step farther, still following the guiding finger of Providence, let us unite our fortunes."

"I am afraid I do not quite follow."

"Let us join our destinies in a common cause."

"Still I am somewhat at a loss."

"Then I will be plain: Why should you not marry me? —why not! Together we shall be irresistible—we will be joint-presidents—you shall rule Caracas."

The monstrous nature of the proposition would have moved him to laughter had he not felt that any display of merriment might have sudden and disastrous consequences. This was not a lady whom it would be safe to treat with ridicule.

"The compliment which you pay me takes me entirely by surprise."

"I know, I know! There is no need for you to tell me that you did not dream of the sentiment with which you have already inspired my bosom. Therefore I say that it is only a hint which I throw out. Consider the matter during the night. In the morning come and tell me what is in your heart. There is a priest on board. The rest will be a matter of only a few minutes. This, however, I may add—certain persons on this ship think that they have me under their thumb. Bianchi in particular. He imagines that he has me tied to a piece of string, and that I will jump this way and that as he wishes. You will put his nose out of joint. When we are man and wife we will have a little explanation with these persons. We will show them that we mean to play the game our own way. They are but cards which, when we have played them, we will throw aside. You understand? Therefore, until the morning."

It was with the idea that he should turn the lady's "hint" over in his mind, and, in the morning, make an offer on his own account, that the parting took place, with great show of friendship on her side, and much ceremony on his. When he found himself on deck he permitted himself to give vent to some of that laughter which he had judged it discreet to restrain in the lady's actual presence. While he was still laughing he found himself confronted by Miss Thornton.

"Something tickles you. You have been amused?"

"On the whole. And you?"

"Not at all. Throughout the day I have been practically a prisoner in my own cabin, which is not amusing. Has Donna Luisa given you all the information you desired?"

"She has been candid—candid almost to a fault."

"So that now you know all about her and her plans."

"I do, every bit."

"And you are content?"

"Tolerably. I am of a contented nature. Besides, why be discontented when there is nothing to be gained by it?"

"You are a philosopher, at least in theory."

They spoke of this and that, the talk passing from theme to theme in a fashion which the gentleman, at any rate, found pleasant, until they were interrupted by the approach of Mr Bianchi, accompanied by the individual who had but a single eye.

"Excuse me, Mr Otway, if I interrupt you; but may I ask you to step aside a little. There are a few words which I would say to you, with your permission."

He stepped aside, though not far enough to be out of Miss Thornton's hearing, if that lady chose to listen, a fact of which Mr Bianchi himself seemed to be unconscious. There was, indeed, in that gentleman's demeanour something which suggested mental disturbance.

"You will forgive me, Mr Otway, if my manner seems strange; but there is something in the air which I do not understand. I have been down to Donna Luisa, but already she has retired—or I am told she has—and she refuses me admission. May I ask you what has passed between you? I beg you to believe that I have some title to put to you that question."

"Since it is to your kind offices I am indebted for my introduction to Donna Luisa, I admit your title readily, and will answer your question in a single sentence. Donna Luisa has done me the honour to ask me to be her husband."

"Her—what?"

Otway felt that if he had knocked the two gentlemen's heads together he could not have occasioned them more surprise—of a disagreeable kind.

"Her husband. She informs me that there is a priest on

board, and that, therefore, the matter can be settled in a very few minutes."

"It is incredible!"

"Not at all; why should it be? It seems that certain persons on board imagine that they have her under their thumb; and she is of opinion that, if I were her husband, she would be in a position to show them that they were mistaken; and she would show them too."

"So that is the idea! Was ever anything so monstrous?"

"I really don't see why. Instead of allowing her associates to diddle her she proposes to diddle them. Could anything be more natural?"

"So that is your opinion. Now I begin to understand. You hear, MacManus?"

The question was put to the one-eyed gentleman, who rejoined:

"I am not surprised. Something of the kind was bound to come sooner or later. She has sold every one with whom she has ever dealt; she was certain to have a try at selling us."

"But in such a fashion! What a woman! Rather, what a devil: How she has lied to me; to all of us!"

"Lied! She has never done anything else but lied. She couldn't if she tried."

"That she should think to play such a trick on me—on me!—to whom she owes everything!"

"It is because she is in your debt that she proposes to trick you; that is the way she pays."

"Is it? We shall see. And you, Mr Otway, what did you say to this—lady?"

"Oh, I said nothing. I'm to have my say in the morning. I thought, in the meantime, I would ask your advice as to whether there was any reason why I should not avail myself of the lady's generosity and become her husband."

An interpolation came from an unexpected quarter, from Miss Thornton, who evidently had been listening. She joined the trio.

"I certainly know of none. On the contrary, I think there is every reason why you should. It seems to me that it would be an excellent match for every one concerned."

Otway was conscious that merriment was in the lady's tones, laughter in her eyes; but Mr Bianchi was too agitated to notice anything of the kind.

"So, Miss Thornton, that is what you think. Now I see still farther into the business! You also are in the conspiracy."

"Why do you speak of conspiracy, Mr Bianchi? If Donna Luisa has set her heart on marrying Mr Otway, you know very well that she will do so in spite of anything any one may say."

"Such, also, is my impression," admitted Otway, willing to fall in with the lady's mischievous mood. "To be quite frank, Mr Bianchi, I fancy she has more than half-an-eye on you. She says that you have her attached to a piece of string, which she would like to cut."

"She would like to cut it, would she! My God! what a woman! what a devil of a woman!"

Mr Bianchi showed a disposition to dance about as if the deck had been hot bricks. When, after a somewhat animated discussion, Mr Otway found himself alone in his own cabin he considered the matter.

"Unless I err, Mr Bianchi had his own intentions in the direction of Donna Luisa, which, up to my advent on the scene, she did her best to encourage. I shouldn't be surprised if, during the course of the night, something happens."

His forecast proved correct: something did happen.

He was roused out of slumber to find that his cabin was in the occupation of a number of gentlemen with revolvers in their hands. Bianchi was leaning over him:

"Get up. Put on these clothes. If you are silent you will not be hurt; if you are not silent——"

A movement of the revolver he was holding formed an eloquent finish to the sentence. The other revolvers seemed to him to be full of persuasion. He got into the clothes referred to, which appeared to have been borrowed from one of the sailors.

"Come with us; and—silence!"

Mr Otway went with them—silently. They escorted him —with pistols pointed towards him—on to the deck to where a boat had been made ready to be lowered into the sea.

"Get into that boat, or—we will help you."

"No assistance needed, thank you very much." So soon as he was in it he perceived that the boat already had another occupant. "Miss Thornton!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Miss Thornton," echoed Bianchi. "I wish you both a pleasant voyage. Let go!"

The boat was lowered with a rapidity which did credit to those who were manipulating the ropes. So soon as it touched the water it was cast loose. The lady and the gentleman were alone together on the moonlit sea.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE BOAT

IT had all come about so quickly that it was not strange that George Otway should ask himself if it were not possible that he was the victim of some new form of hallucination. The little boat, the girl in front of him, the moon in the sky, the feeling of loneliness amid the waste of waters, the smoke and lights of the steamer which were already fading on the horizon. Since it was certain that not ten minutes before he was fast asleep in bed it was only natural he should wonder if, after all, these things were not part and parcel of some interrupted dream. So doubtful was he—so, as it were, under the influence of a spell—that it was more than a minute before he found his voice.

"Is it a dream?"

Apparently the girl had been under the influence of a similar obsession, from which she was aroused by his words. She gave a long sigh, put her hands up to her eyes.

"It seems as if it were a dream."

Then she laughed, which perhaps did more to bring them to a clearer sense of actualities than anything else could have done. He laughed too.

"We live in a world of change."

"It would seem as if within the last few days I had got into such a world. Until then nothing ever happened."

"A quarter of an hour ago I was fast asleep on board the *Queen of the Seas*."

"It's longer ago than that since I was fast asleep. I suppose they woke me first because they took it for granted that I should take longer to get into my clothes. When they put me into the boat I thought they were going to turn me adrift in it all by myself. I didn't like the idea at all. Do you know, when they woke me I was dreaming that I was acting as bridesmaid at your marriage to Donna Luisa."

"Rather this than that that dream should have come true."

"Really? I don't know. You might have become reconciled to the idea. Think of what a future you have lost—wife of the Mother of Caracas. You might have become Father of Caracas yourself in time."

"Thanks; I prefer to be excused. You seem to take the situation very lightly."

"Perhaps that's because I have not yet realised what the situation actually is. Then, I was so uncomfortable on the *Queen of the Seas*. More than once I felt like taking a header overboard. This is better than jumping into the sea."

"We'll hope so, at any rate. It's fortunate the wind has dropped."

"Yes; isn't it deliciously calm? And such a perfect moon! I can see hills and mountains. It's like a Thames backwater on a summer night."

"With a difference. Let's trust the similarity may continue. By the way, do you know whereabouts we are?"

"Not in the least."

"Nor I. So that is nice for a beginning. Even if they have put nautical instruments on board, which is doubtful, I have not the faintest knowledge of navigation, and am unable to tell, from a study of the heavens, whether we are in the neighbourhood of Madagascar or on the North Atlantic Ocean. How long has the steamer been at sea?"

"This is the ninth night since we came out of the Thames."

"No! Then I must have lain seven days unconscious—drugged. I must have the constitution of a horse, because now I'm feeling as fit as a fiddler."

"You're looking pretty fit, which, from a selfish point of view, is fortunate, since, for me, the issues of life and death are so largely in your hands."

"Please God, I'll bring you safely through. Though, if I ever get the chance, Mr Bianchi shall smart for not having been satisfied to have rid himself of me."

"Wouldn't you have been lonely—by yourself?"

"I should have known that you were safe on board the *Queen of the Seas*."

"I am not so sure of that. There are worse things than death. For instance, there is Donna Luisa, and there are many masculine varieties of Donna Luisa on board the *Queen of the Seas*."

"I suppose so. Well, all is for the best in this best of all

possible worlds ; we'll lay all we're worth on that. I take it we may assume that the steamer was bound for Caracas."

"Where is Caracas?"

"You don't know? You seem to have been engaged in a pretty little game of blind-man's-buff, Miss Thornton. Caracas borders the Caribbean Sea, on the north coast of Venezuela, of which state it is supposed to form an integral part. But whether Caracas rules Venezuela, or Venezuela Caracas, is at the present moment undetermined. I imagine that a steamer for Caracas would go by way of the West Indies. If she is nine days out, and a good mover, we oughtn't to be so very far away from them. If we've luck we may strike some land in—so to speak—less than no time."

"And if we haven't luck?"

"We won't look at that side of the question, because we shall have luck. Why, what's that? There's a ship already! Miss Thornton, didn't I tell you we should have luck?"

There suddenly appeared, on Otway's right, a huge vessel. She was coming directly towards them. She was still at a distance of some three or four miles, but was moving so swiftly that each moment the space between them was perceptibly lessened. Miss Thornton watched her with gleaming eyes.

"What a monster. She could swallow the *Queen of the Seas*. If she keeps her present course she'll run us down."

"She'll see us long before then. She's bound to see us. You may be sure that on a vessel of her size a keen look-out is always kept. We'll rig up a sail, or a flag of distress, or whatever you choose to call it. We'll fasten it to an oar. They won't help being able to see that, even if, by a miracle, they fail to see the boat. What is there that we can use?"

"Look! what is that behind you?"

He whirled himself about.

"Where? I can see nothing."

But when he turned again towards her he saw that she was holding out to him what looked uncommonly like a lady's petticoat, and that her cheeks were flushed.

"See! here's something we can use! Quick! let's rig up our flag of distress ; it seems to me that that steamer's coming towards us like a streak of lightning."

Together they attached the petticoat to an oar by means

of its own strings. Otway held it aloft; it floated pennon-wise in the gentle breeze.

"Ship ahoy!—ship ahoy!" he shouted.

The girl standing up beside him, waving her handkerchief, joined her voice to his:

"Ship ahoy!"

The huge steamer came steadily on.

"They don't see us!"

"But they will see us! If there's a look-out on deck they must see us. Ship ahoy! ship ahoy!"

"If they don't see us they'll run us down."

"But they'll have to see us! Ship ahoy! ship ahoy!"

The huge ship came rapidly on. She was now within half-a-mile. They shouted and shouted, waved the pennon, did the little all they could to attract attention. No heed seemed to be taken of them by any one on board. Already they could hear the swish of the water about her bows, the revolutions of her screw.

"What shall we do to make them notice? They won't see us!"

"Every one must be asleep—or dead—or drunk."

"Look out—they'll run us down!"

"They won't do that. There's room enough for them to pass us if they will go by."

They did go by, at a distance from the little boat of perhaps thirty feet, like a mighty black wall, towering above them, blotting out the moon: a moving, monstrous mystery. Lights were to be seen, but no sign of any living thing. When she was abreast Otway and the girl yelled with the full force of their lungs. But there came no response; nothing to show that they had come within human ken. Then, in a moment, it seemed, she was past; their tiny craft caught in her wash bubbled up and down like a cork in a mill-race. Otway gave a final, frenzied shout, and was still. He yet held the oar aloft with its fluttering drapery. But the retreating mammoth was only a blue speck on the horizon when he spoke again.

"That's how watch is kept on some of our floating castles. And yet, if anything happened, any misadventure, there'd be plenty to swear that the look-out never slackened." He turned to his fellow-passenger, who was seated in the stern: "Well?"

"It's a little disappointing."

The mildness of her language moved him to laughter.

"Yes; it is a little disappointing."

"I've shouted myself quite hoarse. But let's be fair. It was some way up from us to them, a tremendous way. And there's always a noise on a great steamer—all sorts of noises—besides the noise of the engines. I daresay we weren't so obvious as we supposed. So, let's say, better luck next time."

"Next time may be a long way off."

"Mr Otway, I hope you're not a pessimist. I've been told that there are some men who are more easily depressed than women. I hope you are not one of them."

"It's you I'm thinking of."

"That's very sweet of you. But—at present—I'm very comfortable."

There was something in her words which moved him oddly; moved him, indeed, to silence, until the moon went behind a cloud, and where before was radiance was the shadow of a great darkness.

"Hadn't you better lie down in the bottom of the boat and try to get some sleep? I'll make you as comfortable as I can. There's nothing to be done until the day comes. It's no use my attempting to row when I don't even know the direction in which we are moving."

"I'm not a bit tired. I'd sooner sit up and keep you company if you don't mind."

Again there was something in the fashion of her speech which touched him; again an interval of silence.

"Miss Thornton, have you had an adventurous life?"

Her laugh came to him through the darkness.

"An adventurous life? Me! Why, my father's vicar of a Sussex parish. You can see our house from Chanctonbury Ring. I've scarcely ever been away from home—except to school—until I went to be companion to a lady. Why do you ask?"

"Because you have a brave heart, and face the music with a smile."

This time there was silence at her end of the boat. When she did speak, it was in a lower tone.

"Don't you be so sure of that. The truth is, I was so unhappy on the *Queen of the Seas* that I feel like a girl who has escaped from a school she hated. Besides, we are as near God on sea as on land."

The moon did not reappear. Probably she had set before the clouds, which had obscured her, had journeyed on. Despite her absence the night continued warm and dry. They talked on all manner of themes until the sun began to cast pencils of light across the sky. Then there came a transformation, wrought as by the touch of a magician's hand, and they watched the wondrous stages in the birth of a sunlit day.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"I should think it more beautiful if there were anything to be seen."

"Why, where are your eyes? There's the sun and the sky and the sea—all three a blaze of colour."

"No doubt. I'd prefer the glimpse of a ship, or of a coast-line."

"Mr Otway, I'm beginning to fear that you're a Philistine."

"And I, Miss Thornton, am commencing to be permeated by a suspicion that you're a dreamer."

"I don't resent the accusation in the least, if it is an accusation. One can both dream and do. Some of the finest things that ever have been done have been done by dreamers. But a Philistine, oh dear! And as for your coast-line—why, what's that?"

In sudden excitement she stood up, pointing directly over his head. He glanced round. In the dim distance was what, at first sight, looked like a hazy blur.

"Isn't it a cloud on the horizon?"

"A cloud? No! I think—I believe—I'm sure—it's land."

He gazed long and steadily in the direction in which she had pointed.

"I think it's possible it may be."

"I'm certain that it is. My eyes are almost as good as some telescopes. I can make the coast-line out distinctly. But what land can it be? and how far are we away?"

"I can give you an answer to neither question; but I take it that, anyhow, it's at a tremendous distance. However, it's an objective: something to row for. I'll buckle to."

Getting the oars into their places he settled down to a steady pull. For some time he rowed in silence. Then she spoke again. The sun had come up into the heavens, filling all space with his glory. She was trailing the fingers of her left hand in the gleaming waters.

"Mr Otway." He nodded. "Aren't you very rich?" He nodded again. "You have everything that the heart of man can desire: wealth, reputation, health, youth——"

"Youth! I'm past forty."

"What's forty? A man isn't really a man until he's forty." He gave a short laugh. "Having all these things, why did you leave England as you seem to have done?" As the moments passed, and he did not reply, she set her own interpretation on his speechlessness. "It's an odd question. I ought not to have asked it. You needn't answer."

"I don't mind answering. I left it all behind—because a woman jilted me."

She turned towards him with a start; her eyes wide open.

"Because a woman jilted you? But that's no reason; or —if it is—it's a very little one."

"These things are matters of opinion; no doubt you would think so."

"That's not fair; it isn't what I meant. I'm thinking of the estimation of the world."

"I never did care for what the world thinks, thank you."

"But see what a price you've paid! If you hadn't been so—hasty you wouldn't be here."

"I don't know on what grounds you consider yourself entitled to call me hasty; and I don't mind being here—thanking you again."

"But you may have cut yourself off from the world for ever. You may never again look on the face of a friend. This land for which we're making may turn out to be a desolate rock, void of the means of sustenance, where relief may never find us."

"It is the thought of such a fate being in store for you which weighs upon my mind."

"Me! What does it matter for me? I'm not of the least importance: I'm nothing and nobody. I don't loom large in the world's economy."

"Quite so. We'll leave these nice points for further discussion. In the meantime, how about breakfast? Oughtn't you to have something to eat? They seem to have pre sented us with a certain quantity of food in tins—unless the tins are empty."

"I'm not a bit hungry."

"Perhaps not; but you will be very soon. By the way, I suppose you haven't such a thing as a watch about you."

"But I have. I slipped one into my blouse just as they were marching me off, and I wound it up. It's just twenty minutes to five."

"There aren't many girls who'd think of a watch when, for all they knew, they were being marched off to instant execution. You're one in a million. Then at six o'clock we'll sample what's inside those tins. It appears to me that I have been pulling for the best part of an hour. Has that land of yours resolved itself into a fog-bank, or is it more obviously land?"

"It's more obviously—and quite unmistakably—land; but it's still a tremendous distance off. You must be tired. Let me have a turn at the oars."

"Can you row?"

"Can I row! Sometimes I've nearly lived on the Thames."

"Have you? I know young ladies who have quite, and who yet can't row. The trouble is that I'm so soft. I sha'n't tire; but my hands are like putty—much pulling will make mincemeat of them. However, I'll row till breakfast; then, while I'm preparing the morning meal, you shall take your shift."

At six the exchange was effected. Miss Thornton took her place in the bow. Otway proceeded to examine the stores with which Bianchi's tender mercies had endowed them, and which hitherto had been lying in a higgledy-piggledy heap in the bottom of the boat.

"Here's what purports to be corned-beef; here's a tin of captain biscuits; and in this barrel I suppose there's water. Only there seems to be no way of getting it out except this bunghole, which promises waste. Now breakfast, please! Ship those oars, and fall to."

"But I've only just commenced to row."

"Nobody denies it. You shall have your fill of it afterwards, only don't keep the breakfast waiting. I'll pour some water out into this tin arrangement, but I'm afraid we shall have to share it."

"I don't mind, if you don't."

"You know very well that I don't mind."

He looked at her with something in his eyes which caused her to pay what seemed to be an unnecessary amount of attention to one of the oars. They consumed their curious

meal—corned-beef, captain biscuits, water—not only with relish, but with what seemed real enjoyment. It was odd how very much at home they seemed to be in each other's society, and how willing to make the best of what—to say the least—was a peculiar position. When they had made an end of eating, Miss Thornton insisted on taking another spell. She eyed Otway as he took his ease among the stores.

"Why don't you smoke? Haven't you any tobacco?"

He shook his head.

"They might have given me both pipe and tobacco if I had thought of them, but I lacked your presence of mind. You know I'm a commonplace sort of creature: you're a girl in a million."

"You mustn't laugh at me; I don't like it."

Her smile contradicted her words. Besides, he was not laughing, he was admiring the deft fashion in which she handled the oars. Just before he took them from her again, standing on the stern seat, he took a long sight over the sea.

"Sure enough it is land; you're right again. Miss Thornton, those eyes of yours are jewels. And, by George, I shouldn't wonder if it's inhabited; that's smoke, or I'm a Dutchman."

She joined him in his attempt to resolve the meaning of that line on the horizon.

"It certainly is smoke; but—don't you think it's very high up?"

"It does seem pretty high. Another hour's steady pull ought to bring us well within range."

It was more than an hour before a suggestion came from her as to the meaning of the smoke.

"There's a high hill, and the smoke is coming from the top of the hill; I do believe from the hill itself. Mr Otway, do you think it's a volcano?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were right; it looks as if it were something of the kind."

Another hour placed the matter beyond doubt. By that time they were within less than a mile of the shore. A precipitous coast, for the most part, it seemed to be, although here and there trees covered the shelving cliffs almost to the water's edge. So far as they could see there were no signs of human habitation. Inland there rose what now appeared

to be a positive mountain; it towered far up towards the sky. Not from the summit itself, but from very near, on the side opposite to that on which they were, smoke was ascending: for several minutes together in thin, filmy wreaths, then in huge, black masses which obscured the heavens. Mr Otway observed this latter display with something approaching to uneasiness.

"A volcano, beyond a doubt, and showing a disposition to be active. There seems to be nothing to discern of anything in the shape of a human population. The question, therefore, arises, shall we try to land, or shall we give the place—which I, for one, don't like the look of—a wide berth, even at this eleventh hour, and trust to be able to find more hospitable quarters farther on?"

"After our pulling and pulling and pulling? No, thank you. My hands are like yours, they're softer than I thought. Soon we shall both of us be nothing else but blisters. We failed to make an impression on that horrid steamer last night but we won't lose an opportunity of getting on to dry land; we might have to go a thousand miles without meeting with any more. I've never seen a volcano, except in pictures. I'm most anxious to make the acquaintance of a real one. As for population, there may be all sorts of people whom we can't see. My chief fear is that they may be savages, or belong to a class whose society we would rather be without."

Otway laughed. The tone in which she spoke suggested that she regarded the whole proceeding as a glorified picnic. It was not for him to point out to her that there was another side to the shield: it would probably force itself upon her attention quickly enough.

"I can't give even a reasonable guess at our exact latitude and longitude, but I don't think there's much fear of our encountering savages. So here's for a try to find a landing-place."

CHAPTER VIII

THE ISLAND

HE only had to row straight on to succeed in doing that. He beached the boat on level, sandy ground, on which the pair had no difficulty in dragging it up beyond what appeared to be the reach of the waves. At that point the cliffs declined so as to form a natural valley. Together they moved away from the sea. Tropical vegetation came right down to the point where the shore met the land, growing so closely as to form what seemed, at first sight, to be an impenetrable thicket. When they perceived this to be the case they paused to consider the situation, Otway being the first to speak.

"This doesn't look very inviting. Which is the way in I wonder! Can you see any sign of a track? Not much promise of civilisation there."

"No; but there's promise of mystery, of this being the abode of romance, of those fairies which have deserted their English haunts. In that wilderness of greenery they should be at their ease, as in England in days of old. As for track, I don't believe there is one. We shall have to cut one with our pocket-knives."

"I presume that the fact that I don't possess a pocket-knife doesn't count. I fancy that the trees don't seem quite so dense on the cliff on our right. Let's try a little exploration in that direction."

He led; she followed. At the point to which he had referred the growth was less dense. It was possible, but only just possible, to force a way through the trees, shrubs, creepers, climbing plants, which had become so interlaced as to form a kind of network. So dense was the foliage overhead that where they were all was in strange, mysterious shadow. Progression involved no slight labour. The heat was great. There arose an unpleasant odour from the rank vegetation. Before they had gone forward many minutes Miss Thornton began to have enough of it.

"Shall we ever find an end to this dreadful place? Wouldn't you like a little fresh air? We might be miles away from the sea. I can hardly breathe."

"It is a trifle sultry. It reminds me of an orchid-house, only it's a great deal closer."

"I don't like orchid-houses, thank you, nor the atmosphere of any kind of greenhouse. If you please, I'd rather go back, if you don't mind, to where we can taste the fresh air from the sea." He hesitated, as if doubting what to do. "Well—shall I lead the way back, or will you?"

"You, by all means, if you know which is the way back; I'm beginning to wonder if I do."

"Mr Otway!"

"I'm afraid that we haven't been very wise; and that I, in particular, have been a first-class fool. A maze is nothing compared to this; we ought to have looked out for landmarks. In which direction would you say the sea is?"

"I haven't the least idea." She was looking about her with startled eyes. "You don't mean to say that we're lost in this dreadful place?"

"We can scarcely be lost; it's only a little bewildering, that's all. I propose that we press on."

"Then press on; but what do you call pressing on?"

"Well, I think we were going this way when we stopped."

"Then let us keep on that way; any way's better than standing still."

They again moved forward, for, as it appeared to them, an interminable length of time. The ground became uneven; it rose and fell; it was hard to keep a footing. The sense of mystery, of darkness, grew more and more. Climbing plants, lacing tree to tree, formed impenetrable barriers. They progressed in corkscrew fashion, winding in and out as best they could, all sense of direction gone. Here and there monstrous ferns, coarse grasses, enveloped them on every side, rising high above their heads, so that they bade fair to be choked among their roots. So far they had encountered no living creature except themselves. Suddenly, however, something moved, as it seemed, from underneath their feet.

"What was that?" cried the girl. "Oh, Mr Otway, I believe it was a snake!"

"Whatever it was, it was afraid of us."

The same thought had occurred to her. Although his

actual knowledge of the subject was *nil*, he was conscious of a feeling that this was the sort of nightmare forest in which serpents might be expected to breed. The presence of the moving thing seemed to have affected Miss Thornton more than anything which had gone before. She spoke as if she gasped for breath.

"How long—do you think—we shall be—before we get out—of this dreadful place?"

"Not long now, I hope. Bear up a little longer, and I shall say you're a girl in a billion."

"It's not easy—to bear up."

It was not easy. More than once she was in danger of breaking down. He had continually to encourage her, though he was badly in need of encouragement himself. Fortunately, there were no further signs of their causing disturbance to any living thing. Spent, torn, filthy, they struggled on through the trap into which they had so inadvertently strayed for what seemed hours, until Mr Otway suddenly cried:

"Look! There's light ahead! It's the sea; or, if it isn't the sea, please goodness it's the end of this."

With renewed energy they struggled on to where the sunlight could be seen glancing through the vista far in front. It was not the sea, but it was the end of that vegetable tangle. So soon as they were out of it the girl sank exhausted on the ground. With his coat sleeve he wiped the sweat off his cheeks and brow, trying to smile at her.

"Tired? It was pretty bad, wasn't it?"

"It was like some horrid nightmare; I don't believe I could have kept up much longer. But now where are we?"

To judge from appearances, they had not reached very desirable quarters yet. They seemed to have found an open space in the heart of the jungle—an abode of desolation on which even tropical vegetation refused to grow. It was as if some devastating blight had claimed it for its own. The ground was bare of covering. Shut in by trees on every side, the atmosphere was not much more invigorating than in the forest itself. Otway felt, as he looked about him, that it was not a place which one could love.

"We don't appear to have struck oil now to any extent. The most favourable remark I can make is that over there

the forest does seem thinner, and that there is the promise of some sort of a path. Shall I go forward and investigate?"

"And leave me here? No, thank you." She was on her feet in an instant. "This place isn't much better than where we've just come out of. Where you go I will go, with your permission."

"There's no such haste. Hadn't you better rest a little before you go on again?"

"There is haste; and I don't want rest. I don't want any rest till we're back to the sea. I'd sooner be on the sea for ever than here for a single day." He laughed outright at what seemed to him to be feminine exaggeration. She turned to him in sudden anger. "Why do you laugh at me? I mean what I say. You mustn't laugh here, in this place of evil! What is that on that tree over there, the one which looks as if it had been struck by lightning?"

Otway had been wondering himself. Together they went to see. Against the trunk of what was but a mere torso of a forest giant a board had been nailed, on which, in rude letters, which had apparently been burnt into it, was this inscription:

"THIS IS THE GATE OF HELL! AVOID IT IF YOU WOULD FLEE FROM EVIL!"

It was a startling legend to encounter, unawares, in such a place. As she read it the girl came closer to the man, nestling to his side, slipping, as if unconsciously, her arm through his. He felt that she was trembling. Her voice sank nearly to a whisper.

"What does it mean? Then there is some one here beside ourselves. I wonder who. What a dreadful thing to put upon that board!"

"Evidently there has been some one here; but whether there is any one now is another question, as to which I'm doubtful. It's a long time since that board was put up there. The lettering's faded, the nails which attach it are rusted, they're sagging out of the tree."

She gave a little cry.

"Mr Otway, there's some one lying under those trees now, asleep!"

He looked where she was pointing. There, in plain sight,

was the figure of a man recumbent on the ground. His back was towards them. Otway raised his voice to a shout.

"Hi! you there! hollo!"

No answer was returned. The figure did not move.

"He's sleeping very soundly," said the girl.

"Not so sound but that, if he is asleep, we'll wake him."

They crossed to the silent figure. Otway, stooping down, laid his hand upon the sleeper's shoulder. As he did so, the figure seemed to crumble; all at once the patchwork suit of clothes was empty. With an exclamation he started back.

"My God! it's a skeleton!"

"A skeleton!"

The girl's voice echoed his amazement, his horror. It was a skeleton, which, owing to some freak of nature, had hung together inside the clothes until Otway, by applying pressure, had dissolved it into separate bones. When they looked more closely they perceived that a scrap of paper was pinned to the fragments of what once had been a jacket. On it were scrawled some almost illegible words which Otway with difficulty deciphered.

"This is John Cleaver who went mad and died 1863."

"Forty years ago! For forty years he has lain there, sleeping. Went mad and died? I shouldn't be surprised if it were he who put up that board. I wonder who pinned this paper on to his coat, and why that person didn't bury him. There's a mystery here which might be worth unravelling."

"Come away! or I also shall be in danger of going mad."

The words were scarcely spoken when there came a sound as of many thunderclaps; the ground shook under their feet, the sky was obscured. She clung to him, screaming. For some moments he himself was at a loss as to what had happened. As, by degrees, it dawned on him he strove to comfort her.

"It's all right! It's only the volcano making what I take to be one of its periodical remarks. It is its tendency to behave in this sort of way which explains, I fancy, that singular statement which is on the board there, that this is the gate of hell."

How he got her out of that place of desolation, through that labyrinthine maze born of tropic prodigality, back to the sound and sight and taste of the sea, he could not afterwards have told; and she never knew. Sometimes he led

her, as if she were a child, by the hand; sometimes he dragged her through obstacles it was impossible to surmount; sometimes he bore her in his arms. Luckily the forest, on the side on which he now attempted it, was less dense than at first, or he would have had to give up the struggle long before the end. When, at last, he found himself clear of the trees, under the open sky, he was reeling like a drunken man. He was carrying the girl. His first thought was for her. He laid her down on the ground as tenderly as if she had been some tiny child. Then, sinking like a log at her side, before he knew it he was asleep.

She was first to awake; starting up as if in sudden alarm; looking about her, in doubt as to where she was. She was lying on what was apparently almost the edge of the cliff; in front, far below, was the sea. Strange noises were in her ears; the earth was shaking; dense masses of smoke hid the heavens. Beside her lay her companion, still sound asleep—torn, travel-stained, bedraggled almost beyond recognition.

"Mr Otway!" she cried. "Where are we? where's the boat?"

He instantly sat up as she pronounced his name. Then, as a perception of his surroundings returned to him, he raised himself to his feet, stretching his limbs like a giant refreshed.

"I rather fancy that I've been dozing; I'm feeling all the better for it. And you?"

"I also have only just woke up. Where are we? How did I get here?"

"I've an idea that I carried you, at least now and then."

"Carried me? You couldn't! You must be nearly dead! I'm so heavy."

"I don't think I'm nearly dead; and there was no other way."

"But where's the boat? The volcano's in eruption!"

"I've no notion what is the name of the volcano whose habitation we have struck, but I'm inclined to the opinion that it's his custom to go on like this. As for where the boat is, we oughtn't to have much difficulty in finding that out." He looked over the top of the cliff: "It strikes me that a little farther on it would be easy to scramble down to the beach. There appears to be a belt of dry land between the cliffs and the sea. It might be better to get back to the boat by the shore than to attempt to return by way of the forest."

"The forest! I would sooner stay here for ever than try to get back by the forest!"

They scrambled down, as he had suggested, on to the shore, experiencing no difficulty in returning by it to where they had left the boat. Miss Thornton was for getting into it at once, and putting off, at any risk, from that inhospitable place. But Mr Otway was against her. He pointed out that the wind was rising; that there was a prospect of more dirty weather being close at hand; that so small a craft could not be expected to live in anything like a heavy sea. Temporarily, at least, they were safe where they were. They had firm land beneath their feet; probably as much chance of catching the attention of passing vessels as if they were afloat. While, if they got afloat again, not having the vaguest knowledge of their whereabouts, they could only drift aimlessly hither and thither; they could not know which course to steer, nor how to bring themselves within reach of the ocean highway.

Perceiving the relevancy of his arguments, she fell in with his ideas. They found irregularities in the face of the cliffs which afforded rudimentary shelter. Here they carried their scanty stores, in the hope that they would be kept both dry and cool. At one point there was an abrasion, or rent, in the surface of the rock, which amounted to an actual cavern—of small dimensions, truly—but still large enough to serve as sleeping chamber to a single lady. Here Miss Thornton established her night-quarters. The cave, which was some ten or twelve feet above the shore, was reached by a sloping shelf, which formed a natural, if somewhat slippery, footpath. Mr Otway slept below, in any nook he at the moment fancied. And sometimes, in wakeful mood, he would keep watch and ward over the lady in her nest above.

In this remote corner of the world these two persons spent three weeks; shorter weeks than some might suppose. Not always in the same spot, for by circumnavigating it in their boat they ascertained that the place was an island. The complete circuit occupied four days and they returned to their starting-point almost with a feeling that they were coming home. Besides establishing the fact that they were on an island they had acquired two other pieces of information: one, that the island was fertile on one side only—that on which they were; on the other the volcano had worked wholesale destruction. The mouth of the crater was on that

side of the mountain. Seemingly it was, more or less, in continual eruption. An unending stream of lava, now so slight as to be scarcely perceptible, now rising to a torrent, was pouring down the slope, stretching out on either hand, carrying ruin and death wherever it went. The second item of information was to the effect that, as they had surmised, the island was uninhabited. It was hardly likely that any person, or persons, would choose, of their own free will, so insecure and solitary a dwelling-place. They could discover no signs that any one ever had lived there; though, at times, their thoughts recurred to the skeleton under the trees.

Elsie Thornton's petticoat—it soon became, with George Otway, a habit to address her by her Christian name, which, the lady owned, was Elsie—floated from the top of the highest tree. It was intended to be a signal of distress; but whether it would convey that impression to a passing ship was a point on which they were not agreed.

Their chief anxiety at the moment was caused by the rapidity with which their stock of food diminished. Sufficiently scanty to commence with, husband it as they might, it approached extinction with alarming haste. Their appetites—to make matters worse—seemed to be preternaturally large. They found the coarsest food not unworthy their attention: they always wanted to be eating. They resorted to fishing as a means of replenishing their larder. Elsie constructed two lines of amazing ingenuity out of materials which came she best knew from where. They used for baits, first, scraps of their own food, and, afterwards, fragments of the fish they caught. For they did catch fish—and in abundance, as a little distance from the shore they came upon a fishing ground into which they had only to drop their lines to pull out prizes.

Miss Thornton had brought with her, from the *Queen of the Seas*, a box of matches—an unusual thing for a girl to carry—but it turned out to be their most precious possession. It was an ordinary penny box of so-called wax vestas. At the time they examined it, it contained seventy-two; for, realising their capital importance, so that they might know precisely where they stood, they proceeded there and then to count them. Never were matches handled more gingerly or used less wastefully. When they had once lighted a fire—which they found it not easy to do, the materials they were compelled to use being slow of ignition—they kept it going, so far as they

were able, both by night and day. It was more likely to attract curious attention, especially at night, than the garment on the tree top. By means of it they cooked their fish; within sight of it, when the darkness fell, they would sit and talk. How they talked! What inexhaustible topics of conversation the girl and the man had the good fortune to light upon. Neither ever seemed to weary of the sound of the other's voice. It was passing strange.

Water was another source of trouble. At the beginning they managed pretty well. A tiny runnel, rather than a stream, trickled down over the cliff a few yards from where they had pitched their tent. Discovering it, Otway hollowed out a sort of basin in which it could collect in sufficient quantities to be of use, and therein it kindly collected. It had not the pleasantest taste—showed, indeed, a disposition to be brackish—but sometimes they would boil it in an empty beef tin, when, having cooled, it became quite drinkable. Still, there was no disguising the truth that it was never quite the sort of water one would choose to drink. And, presently, it changed, in every way for the worse. Possibly the constant state of excitement in which the volcano lived injuriously affected its constitution, for the smoky monster was never really still; indeed, he grew daily more demonstrative. And, though the girl and the man had become, in a measure, reconciled to its curious methods, there came a night when they thought that there was an end of all things.

In the morning the stream was dry: there was not a drop of water to be had.

The girl, roused by the tumult of the volcano's fury, objecting to the sulphurous fumes which were entering her rocky sleeping chamber, in the darkness came running down the slippery footpath which led to where the man was waiting and watching on the shore beneath. As she came she stumbled; and, as she stumbled, she sprained her ankle. In the morning not only was she unable to move, or even stand, but the ankle itself was swelled in a sufficiently ugly fashion. The only remedy which was within their reach was a cold-water bandage; and there was no water.

Nor was water wanted for the lady's foot alone; they were both badly in need of it to drink. Although the first violence of the eruption had perceptibly lessened, it still continued. The air was full of fine, impalpable ash, which got into the

throat, provoking thirst. The pain which the girl was suffering resulted in slight fever. She kept asking for something to drink. At last, succeeding in overcoming her not unnatural reluctance to be left alone he succeeded in persuading her to allow him to go in search of water. Carrying her, at her own request, into the shallow recess which they used as storehouse; making her as comfortable as the conditions permitted, off he started.

"Don't be a second longer than you can possibly help!" she pleaded.

"Not a second!" he assured her.

At the same time both he and she were aware that his absence might of necessity be a somewhat prolonged one.

He took with him their two largest empty tins. As to the exact neighbourhood where water was to be found he was wholly at a loss to decide. Her experience on the day of their landing had made on Miss Thornton such an impression that the interior of the island had remained practically unexplored. They had looked about in the immediate locality of their camping place for a stream which could be substituted for their original brackish supply, and had looked in vain. Beyond that perfunctory search their explorations had not gone.

Otway had a vague notion that at a spot about a couple of miles away what he sought for might be found. When on their voyage of circumnavigation he had noticed, on a low-lying stretch of land, what had struck him might be a stream. Reaching the point in question he found that in part he had been right: there was what evidently had been the bed of a stream; but, where it ought to have run into the sea, the bed was dry. It occurred to him that, if he walked along it, nearer the source he might still find water. He was encouraged in this hope by the fact that, when he had gone some little distance, the hitherto dry bed grew damp and miry. Increasing his pace he pressed more eagerly on. Presently the stream began twisting in and out amid vegetation which became momentarily denser. Signs of water became perceptible, but as yet what there was was more suggestive of slime than of anything fit for human consumption. On and on he went. At last his perseverance was rewarded. For some time the water had been growing more like water and less like slime, until all at once he came upon a broad pool, of an inviting depth, and of a delicious clearness.

He dipped in one of his tins, and drank. It tasted to him like nectar—cool, sweet, refreshing. Filling both tins to the brim he prepared to return. But, glancing round, he saw, in a clear space on the other side of the pool, what seemed to be a hut, formed of branches of trees, and rough unhewn logs. He hesitated, then crossed to see what it might mean. As he went his foot struck against something which was lying on the ground. It was a human skull, blanched by time and exposure until it had become almost as white as snow. A little beyond was a rusty metal box, resting on what was apparently the skeleton of a hand, as if its dying owner had gripped it to the last. Attached to the handle was a strip of paper, on which was written, in characters which had become almost illegible:

"I, Ebenezer Pullen, of Hull, in the county of Yorkshire, give and bequeath this box, with its contents, to whoever finds it, 1865."

The box itself came open as George Otway raised it. A hasty glance sufficed to show him that it apparently contained bank-notes of different countries, and varying values. He thrust it into the bosom of his blue-serge jersey.

By the time that he returned to their camping-place he had probably been absent at least four hours. Regard for the precious contents of his two tins had prevented his making as much haste as he might have done. As it was, not a little of their contents had been spilled; the length of the way, its difficulties, the nature of the receptacles themselves, made it impossible for him to prevent what, under the circumstances, was a cruel amount of waste. As he approached their camping-ground he quickened his pace; calling out to Miss Thornton to advise her of what he knew would be his welcome return.

"Here I am at last! with water too, the best and sweetest you ever tasted!"

No answer was returned. With sudden anxiety he pressed forward to the recess in which he had laid her. It was empty. Supposing that, growing weary of waiting, having recovered sufficently to enable her to move, she had ascended to her own particular cave, he ran up the footpath, calling to her as he went:

"Elsie! Elsie! Where have you hidden yourself?"

There was no one there. He stared about him in stupid bewilderment. Then he hurried back to the shore, looking

for her here and there; shouting all the time, over and over again:

"Elsie! Where are you?"

It was a question to which he was to receive no answer. For hours he went this way and that; back and forth; up and down; screaming himself hoarse. She was to be seen nowhere: had left no sign that she had ever been.

During his absence in search of the water of which she had stood in such imminent need she had apparently been spirited off the face of the earth.

CHAPTER IX

THE FELLOW-PASSENGER

ONE of the passengers on the mail steamer *Cormorant*, who were endeavouring, with the aid of their marine glasses, to make out as much as possible of the volcanic island which they were passing on their port side, thought that he saw a figure standing close down to the water's edge. When he announced his discovery it was endorsed by others. The captain, from his vantage place upon the bridge, perceived that the figure was that of a man, who was waving something above his head. He telegraphed the order to shut off steam. A boat was launched; and presently returned with George Otway.

He had been more than a month alone on the island. He presented an extraordinary spectacle, looking more like a wild man than a civilised Christian, but he seemed in good health, and, at any rate physically, none the worse for his solitary sojourn. He became at once a centre of interest to all on board. Responding to the captain's inquiries, he stated that his name was John Lennard, that he had been a passenger on board the steamship *Sea Queen*, and that it was owing to a misunderstanding that he had been left behind upon the island. The captain did not attempt to conceal his opinion that that statement was more than a trifle curious; but, as the reserved man declined, point-blank, to add to it, and, moreover, expressed his willingness, and ability, to pay for any accommodation which might be given him—displaying a large number of bank-notes in proof of such capacity—the officer in charge of the *Cormorant* had, perforce, to believe as much—or as little—of his story as he chose.

It happened that voyage that the *Cormorant's* passenger-list was almost full. There was only one vacant berth on board, in a double cabin on the lower deck. For this John Lennard paid the price demanded, in ancient bank-notes, at which the purser looked askance.

"These notes are as old as Methusaleh; why weren't they presented for payment years and years ago?"

"They are part of a legacy which was left to me by a man who died some time ago, and who kept all his fortune in a box."

The purser eyed him fixedly for a moment or two, then a twinkle came into his eyes:

"Rather a curious legacy, wasn't it, Mr Lennard? Almost as curious as the way in which you got left behind upon that island. It's another curious fact that you'll have rather a curious cabin mate; meaning no offence, I should say that it will be a case of two curiosities together."

George Otway — as John Lennard — understood, in some degree, what the speaker meant when, in the purser's company, he arrived at the cabin in which a berth had been assigned to him. Although it was broad daylight the door was locked; and it was only after repeated knockings that any notice was taken of their presence. Then a voice called to them from within:

"Who's there?"

"I'm afraid that I shall have to trouble you to open the door, Mr Colenutt. I'm the purser."

A further delay of some seconds. Then the door was opened about six inches. In the interstice appeared an undersized man, with short black hair, close cropped beard and moustache, and a complexion so dark as to suggest a mulatto. His manner was not exactly conciliatory.

"What do you want?"

"Sorry to interrupt you, Mr Colenutt, especially if you were enjoying an afternoon nap. By the way, you must be pretty fond of napping, since you seem never to appear on deck."

"I suppose I'm at liberty to keep to my cabin, if I choose, since I've paid for it."

"Certainly, perfectly at liberty; not a doubt of it; but now it won't be your cabin only."

"What do you mean?"

In Mr Colenutt's voice there was a change of tone which seemed to amuse the purser.

"Allow me to introduce you to Mr Lennard, just come aboard. Since yours is the only cabin in which there is a vacant berth Captain Matthews has put him down for it."

"Put him down for it! Is this—Mr Lennard?"

Otway had enjoyed the ministrations of the ship's barber, had had a bath; had placed himself inside clothes which had been procured for him—at a price—from someone's redundant wardrobe, and which did not fit him so badly as they might have done. He was, therefore, a very different spectacle to that which he had presented when his rescuers first found him. But had he been an ogre, or a gorgon, or some fabled monster, Mr Colenutt could not have regarded him with more undisguised repugnance; a fact which the purser — who seemed to have a vein of humour which was peculiarly his own—noted with a grin which was equally ostentatious.

"This is Mr Lennard; who, I have no doubt, places himself at your service. I am sure that he has as much pleasure in meeting you as you have in meeting him."

If there was any pleasure on Mr Colenutt's side then he concealed the fact with considerable skill. He drew back with something which was so like a snarl that every hair on his head seemed bristling.

"But this is my cabin! You can't let a berth in it over my head just as the whim seizes you. It was only on the understanding that I was to be its sole occupant that I took it; why, it was you who assured me that I should have it to myself."

"Excuse me, Mr Colenutt, but when you came aboard, at the last moment, just as the boat was leaving the wharf, and asked me—as if you were half beside yourself—if there was a vacant cabin, I told you there was this one. And so there was this one. I wasn't to know that another passenger would come aboard in mid-ocean. There are two berths in this cabin, you've paid for one, and Mr Lennard's paid for the other."

"But if you'd given me the faintest hint that anything of this kind might have been expected I'd willingly have paid for both."

"Pity you didn't mention that before. A passenger who wishes to reserve an entire cabin should say so—and pay for its exclusive use—at the time of booking. It's too late to talk about it now."

Mr Colenutt addressed himself to Mr Lennard.

"If you are a gentleman, sir; if you have the slightest sense of gentlemanly feeling, you will not endeavour to intrude yourself where, most emphatically, you are not wanted."

Compared to the other's heat Mr Lennard's manner, as he replied, was calmness itself:

"It is so long, sir, since I was between a decent pair of sheets, that you must show me some very sufficient reason before I can consent to allow you to shut me out from what, after all, is my own."

"So that's the tone you take. Very well! You'll at least stop outside till I've put away certain personal private belongings; and afterwards I'll talk to you in a different fashion."

Before they had anticipated his intention he had withdrawn inside the cabin; shut the door, and bolted it in their faces. Mr Lennard laughed, but the purser's vein of humorous perception seemed to have suddenly run dry.

"He's a cool hand!—confound his impudence!" He hammered at the door with his fist. "Now, Mr Colenutt, I hope you've got sense enough to know that this sort of thing won't do. If you don't open this door at once I shall have to make you."

Mr Lennard played the part of peacemaker.

"That's all right; let him store away his treasures—how does he know what sort of character I am?—then you'll find that he'll open fast enough."

The forecast proved correct. Presently the door was flung wide open.

"Now, sir, if you choose to intrude yourself into my cabin during my temporary absence I suppose that I cannot help it. I am going to see the captain. When I have explained the position to him you will find that he will order you to take the course which your own sense of decency ought to have dictated."

The purser interposed.

"It's no use your going to the captain, Mr Colenutt—not the slightest. Since this gentleman has paid his passage money the captain has no more right to turn him out than he has to turn you."

"I prefer to learn that from the captain's lips rather than from yours; being well aware that with you the whole business is simply a question of the itching palm. If I had made it worth your while to keep this fellow out you would have kept him out; but as I forgot to bribe you you pay me out like this."

Off strode Mr Colenutt, the purser staring after him in angry amazement.

"Well, after that! A nigger like him dares to tell me to my face that I only do my duty because he didn't bribe me not to do it! That's a finisher! I'll show him that he's not the only person on board this ship."

Off went the purser after Mr Colenutt, and Mr Lennard entered the deserted cabin. It was a small affair—an inside cabin, inclined to be stuffy, with an upper and a lower berth, and but scanty accommodation besides—probably one of the worst on the ship. Apparently Mr Colenutt had been in occupation of the lower berth. His sole property in sight was a black canvas cabin trunk. Seemingly the rest of his belongings were stowed away in the lockers: of which, of course, hitherto, he had had the entire run. As Otway observed how cramped one was for space, he told himself that it was not strange that the late sole tenant resented the appearance of someone else to share his quarters. If only he had done so with a little more civility!

But evidently Mr Colenutt had his own method of confronting a delicate situation. When, after a considerable interval, he reappeared, his agitation had not grown less. He broke into a torrent of vituperation on the instant.

"The captain of this ship has no more sense of honour and propriety than his subordinates. It seems that you are to be forced upon me. Very good, then let's understand each other clearly. If you come into this cabin you come as a trespasser, in spite of my strongest protests, to my most serious inconvenience. I warn you that I'll make you as uncomfortable as you're making me; you won't score in the end. I'll make your stay here a continual misery; before long you'll be wishing that you had jumped overboard instead of thrusting yourself where you were not wanted."

The man's anger, though real enough, seemed so futile that the other laughed outright.

"You're candid, anyhow; so now we know where we are. You couldn't have given me a heartier welcome if you had suspected me of designs upon your family plate. All I have to do is to prepare for the good time that's coming."

Mr Lennard's levity did not tend to sweeten Mr Colenutt's temper.

"You may sneer, but I shouldn't be surprised at your designing any kind of robbery. I understand that you're some vagabond who's been picked up from goodness alone knows

where; no doubt those with whom you were associated were glad to be rid of you at any price. I protest against such a person being thrust on me; the probabilities are that you are some notoriously bad character, but I warn you that on the first sign of an attempt on your part to play any of your tricks on me there'll be trouble."

"I should guess that there will be trouble before that, Mr Colenutt; especially if you don't try to remember that it's just as well to behave as if you were a gentleman, even if you don't happen to be one. Judging by your singular conduct, and still more singular language, I should say that there were some very strong and curious reasons why you wish to have this cabin all to yourself."

"What do you mean by that?"

Mr Colenutt had a revolver in his hand.

"I meant exactly what I said. Put that weapon of yours away; I'm a man of peace; but if there's going to be any demonstration with articles of that kind you'll soon be a sorrier man than ever you were in all your life. I repeat that there must be some very remarkable reasons why you wish to be your own company, or you wouldn't be making all this fuss."

Mr Colenutt fidgeted with the revolver in his small brown hands, as if hesitating whether or not to use it upon his companion there and then. On a sudden his mood seemed to change: fury became passionate pleading:

"You are right!—you are quite right! God knows you are right! I have the best of reasons for wishing to have this cabin to myself—no one could have better. I beg you to believe it! I will give you twice as much as you have paid for your berth; I will give you four times as much; I will give you anything you like if you will only let me have this cabin to myself until we reach Southampton."

Lennard shook his head.

"Too late. You should have talked in that strain before you favoured me with examples of your proficiency in another. You have been so good as to call me a vagabond; you have hinted doubts as to my honesty——"

"I will withdraw them all! I will do and say anything you please if you will only let me alone."

"No doubt; that's exactly what I feel. But it won't do. I'm here, and I'm here to stay."

Recognising, probably, the finality which was in the speaker's

tone, Mr Colenutt, ceasing to entreat, returned to rage. For two or three ugly moments it almost looked as if he would discharge his revolver point-blank at Mr Lennard. He stood glaring at the other, as if passion made him inarticulate. Then his pistol hand dropped to his side. He found his voice; speaking with an appearance of outward calm which was in odd contrast to his previous excitement:

"You call yourself John Lennard, I am told; though, possibly, that is not your name. The captain as good as admits that he does not believe a word of the tale you told him; and thinks that probably you were marooned on the island on which you were found as a punishment for some disreputable conduct of your own. In other words, he inclines to the opinion that you are a liar and a blackguard, and—maybe—something worse. This is the man whom he has made a sharer of my cabin. That he is not far out in his estimate of your character your own action in this matter suggests. I will look out for proof that you are what at present Captain Matthews only hints you are. If I find it I will have you—metaphorically—nailed to the ship's counter."

John Lennard only answered:

"You queer little dark-skinned person."

The next night he could not sleep. In the cabin it was close and stuffy. Longing for air he went up on deck. Leaning over the vessel's side, he looked back over the course she had come. It was a fine night; there was a cool, sweet breeze; stars peopled the sky. He almost fancied that he could see a faint gleam against the distant heavens, which might have been the light of the volcano on the Island of the Gate of Hell. As he thought of the days and weeks which he had spent there, pondering, as he was wont to do, on the mystery of the disappearance of Elsie Thornton, someone, coming across the deck, ranged himself alongside. It was the purser, whose name, he had learned, was Adams. Lennard moved his head in acknowledgment of the other's presence, but Adams was the first to speak.

"Isn't it rather late for you to be about, Mr Lennard? Everyone has turned in but you."

"And you."

"And me." There was what almost amounted to an ominous pause; he had seemed to speak with unnecessary emphasis. "It isn't my fault I'm about. Early hours suit me best. But,

when you're playing policeman you have to let your own tastes go by the board."

"Playing policeman? What do you mean?"

"A nasty thing happened last night—the night of the day you came aboard. There was a thief on board this ship."

"A thief? How do you know?"

"Because somebody was robbed by him; a lady who has a state cabin. She's one of those foolish females who won't fasten their cabin doors on the inside, not even when they go to bed; the Lord alone knows why. This thief found out that she was that kind of fool. He sneaked in while she was fast asleep, and sneaked out with what he could lay his hands upon. I tell you this in confidence, Mr Lennard. It isn't generally known on board, as yet; but I thought I'd let you know that it was known to me, especially as nothing of the kind has ever occurred upon this boat before, so that it seems odd that it should have taken place the very first night you came aboard."

There could be no doubt that there was significance in the purser's tone.

"One would almost think, from the way you speak, that you suspected me."

"I don't know that it's got quite so far as suspicion yet, as regards anyone, Mr Lennard. It's only got to wondering, up to now. Only you yourself will perceive that, under the circumstances, it might be just as well for you not to keep hanging about after everyone's turned in."

"I can wish to escape for a few minutes from the stuffy atmosphere of my cabin, and yet be an honest man."

"Of course; not a doubt of it. Still, that thief, if you found him hanging about, maybe that's the kind of talk he'd have at the tip of his tongue."

CHAPTER X

A WILD VENGEANCE

AS John Lennard returned to his quarters below, he had to admit to himself that both in the purser's words and manner there had been something unpleasantly suggestive. It was both odd and awkward that the robbery and his arrival on board should have coincided. Situated as he was, it did not need much imagination to perceive that it might easily become very awkward indeed for him. On trying the handle of his cabin door he found that the bolt had been slipped inside.

"Calm—on my word. To the best of my knowledge and believe Mr Colenutt was fast asleep as I went out. I went as softly as I could; I doubt if I disturbed him; yet he must have got up directly my back was turned, and—locked me out! As he prophesied yesterday, if he indulges in pranks of this sort, there will be trouble. Inside there." He rapped with his knuckles, first gently, then more loudly. Since no heed was paid to his summons he began to lose his patience. "Mr Colenutt, if you don't open this door at once I shall rouse the ship; I'll show you that you sha'n't keep me out of my own cabin with impunity."

Apparently the threat sufficed; before it was necessary to knock again the door was opened. On the threshold stood Mr Colenutt, completely attired. It seemed to be one of his peculiar habits to go to bed with his clothes on; so far, Mr Lennard had not seen him remove a single garment. He assailed the newcomer as if he had been to blame.

"You seem, like certain birds of prey, to be fond of prowling about when all the world's asleep. Last night you chose the small hours for a ramble——"

"Pardon me, Mr Colenutt, I fail to see what interest my movements can have for you, but last night I did not move out of my berth after I had once got in; I slept much too soundly."

"You must suffer from a bad memory, Mr Lennard. I myself saw you get up; I saw you go out; I saw you return. When you did return, you were carrying something in a pocket handkerchief."

He spoke with such an air of assured conviction that the listener was staggered.

"You must have been dreaming!"

The other's rejoinder amazed Mr Lennard still more.

"It was because some instinct told me that you might say something of that kind that I made up my mind to-night to prove to your satisfaction, and my own, that I was not dreaming, unless we are both dreamers, Mr Lennard."

Before John Lennard had a chance of replying, the purser—still, it seemed, playing the policeman—came up to them in stockinged feet.

"This sort of thing won't do, you know, gentlemen: you're disturbing all the ship."

Mr Colenutt explained the position from his own point of view, with instant readiness:

"The room-mate you have given me, Mr Adams, appears to be a person of uncomfortably nocturnal habits. He started on an expedition round the ship in the middle of last night——"

"Last night!"

The purser regarded Lennard with keen, scrutinising eyes. John Lennard returned his gaze unshrinkingly.

"Mr Colenutt is mistaken. I turned in before ten o'clock last night and did not turn out again till seven this morning."

The little, dark-skinned man shrugged his shoulders; he drew back into the cabin.

"Very good. Then, as I saw Mr Lennard both go and return, I must have been the victim of an optical delusion for the first time in my life."

The purser was still eyeing Mr Lennard.

"Do I understand you to affirm that you did not leave your cabin last night in spite of what he says?"

"You do. I fell asleep as soon as I was between the sheets, and did not wake till I went to my bath this morning. I must have been walking in my sleep if what he says is true. But it isn't."

"It's odd; and it's not the only odd thing about you, Mr Lennard. Let me recommend you to turn in now, and not to walk in your sleep."

When they were alone together, John Lennard addressed to his cabin mate a very candid question:

"May I beg you to inform me, Mr Colenutt, what prompted the malicious falsehood which you have just told Mr Adams? Because you know perfectly well that you did not see me leave this cabin; and that, in fact, I did not leave it."

"You charge me with malicious falsehood. After that, so far as I am concerned, there is nothing to be said. You have a front of brass; but I do not intend to quarrel with you, nor to bandy words. It's perfectly clear to me what kind of character you are; I warn you that I mean to make it equally clear to every person on the ship. I do not intend to be forced into close association with a man of your type a second longer than I can help."

"I see what you are driving at; after your frankness I could hardly help but see; but you will find that I am not to be bluffed so easily as you suppose; and I on my side warn you that it is a dangerous game which you are playing."

After he had fallen asleep John Lennard dreamed a somewhat singular dream. He dreamed that a woman was in the cabin. How she came there he did not understand; he only knew, all at once, that she was there. She stood and looked at him; her hair was hanging down her back. She drew close to the side of his berth. She had something in her hand, but he could not make out what it was. She leaned over him as he slept, and suddenly he was overtaken by a great fear. Even in his slumber he had a hideous consciousness that he was in imminent peril of his life. She touched him; and her touch was so real that it banished sleep upon the instant. He sprang up in his berth with so much vigour that he struck his head against the woodwork above, and, falling back, lay for some seconds half stupefied. When, regaining his senses, he looked about him, he found that the cabin was in darkness, and that all was still. But the feeling that there had been someone there was so strong upon him that he switched on the electric light. The cabin was empty; the door was shut; he saw that his fellow-passenger was lying in his berth.

"It must have been a delusion; but, upon my honour, Colenutt himself could not have had a more realistic one." He was thinking of Mr Colenutt's words to the purser: "I could have sworn that a woman touched me!"

The following day he was made aware of a somewhat un-

comfortable fact; that he was looked upon askance by his fellow-passengers. Whoever he approached drew back. At first he supposed that this must be his own fancy; but when, after the third or fourth rebuff, he perceived with what generosity he was left in sole occupation of much more than his share of the deck, he understood that, for some cause, he was in ill odour. The matter was made still more obvious after a visit with which the Captain requested him to honour him in his cabin.

The commanding officer's remarks, though few, were to the point.

"I have no wish to pry into your private affairs, Mr Lennard—you say your name is Lennard, though I am credibly informed that another name was on some of the rags which you were wearing when you came aboard—indeed, I am glad to have been able to render you a slight service. But, since the circumstances under which you became a passenger on this ship were of an exceptional nature, you must permit me to request you to studiously observe the ship's rules: one of those rules being to the effect that no passenger is to leave his cabin after lights are out. You understand me?"

"I am afraid that I understand you only too well, Captain Matthews; and, in my turn, you must allow me to point out that I do not recognise any authority on your part to prevent my enjoying, on the public portions of the deck, the fresh air all night, if it so pleases me."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like that, sir. Since you are only here by my favour, on sufferance, I regret that you should make it necessary for me to have to inform you that—in all things—on board this ship my word is law."

The captain's words rankled. They touched that obdurate, combative streak in George Otway's nature which had brought him where he was, and which was yet to bring him into still more uncomfortable positions. Because he was ordered to do this thing—if for no other reason—he arrived at an immediate resolution that he would disobey. And he did disobey. Not that night; because it chanced that he had scarcely stretched himself in his berth before he was asleep; and he neither woke, nor dreamed, until the day.

The following night it was dirty weather. He turned in at the usual time; but, after what seemed only a few minutes' sleep, became suddenly conscious that he was wide awake; that

outside something like a storm was raging; and that the atmosphere of the cabin was almost stiflingly oppressive. Great beads of perspiration were on his brow. Scrambling out of his berth, slipping into his clothes, he ascended to the deck, careless, alike, of the captain's orders, and of the rushing spray which greeted him as soon as he had got his head out into the open. As luck would have it, he had hardly taken half-a-dozen steps when he all but collided with the purser. Recognition on Mr Adams' part was instantaneous.

"So it's you, is it. I thought you were informed that it's one of the rules of this ship that passengers are not allowed out of their cabins after lights are out."

"If that really is one of the rules, it happens that I'm not the only one who's breaking them. I fancy that my cabin mate's looking for some breathable air as well as me, and if you felt the temperature of the cupboard in which we're berthed—I believe that we're right on top of either the furnaces or the boilers—you wouldn't say that either of us was to blame."

"Do you mean to say that Colenutt's about the ship?"

"He wasn't in the cabin when I came out of it."

"Then it was he I saw go aft. There's such a sea on, and it's so infernally dark, that I thought I was mistaken; but if what you say is right I wasn't. What little game is he up to, I wonder, in weather like this! If he chooses to stay in his cabin all day he sha'n't come out of it at night—or I'll know the reason why."

Mr Adams, grumbling to himself half under his breath, made the best of his way astern; apparently oblivious of the fact that John Lennard was adding to his misdemeanour by accompanying him uninvited.

The *Cormorant* was one of the few ships which, at that time, had fitted up a Marconi installation. It was right aft, bearing, to the uninstructed eye, but a scanty resemblance to the telegraph of ordinary life. At the foot was a small enclosure, screened off from the public gaze, where the operator was wont to take his stand. At night this enclosure was supposed to be secured against intruders. What was, therefore, the surprise of Mr Adams and his companion when, on their approach, out of it there came rushing, Mr Colenutt. That he saw them was obvious; but that the sight of them did not fill him with amazement, or make him conscious that there was anything

which required explanation in his own presence there, was at least equally plain. Even the dim light could not conceal the fact that he was overmastered by some strange excitement. He caught Mr Adams by the arm; his voice rising in a shrill scream above the wind, the noise of the labouring ship, the tumult of the waters:

"They're on board! they're both of them on board! It's a conspiracy; you're all of you against me! Their names are not on the passenger-list; I've seen and heard nothing of them; they're hiding somewhere; but they're on board! on board! and you've deceived me!"

"Steady, Mr Colenutt; not quite so much of it, if you don't mind. Don't you know that the telegraph's private? What have you been doing in there?"

Colenutt seemed to be making an effort to regain some semblance of self-control.

"I have been receiving a message from a friend, about something which is of the first importance." Then, with renewed ferocity. "What do you mean by doctoring the passenger-list? why don't the names of all the passengers appear on it? Why are there concealments?"

"I should imagine, Mr Colenutt, that you can't be feeling quite yourself. Do you say you've been receiving a message? Do you mean a telegram?"

"What else? I've been in communication with a friend, who has my interests at heart; from whom I learn that they're on board, both of them on board. You're all joined in a conspiracy to keep from me the truth, but I've found it out in spite of you."

He hurried off, disappearing in the darkness: the purser making no attempt to stop him.

"Let him go; I should put him down as being more than a little dotty. Didn't I tell you that in that cabin of yours you'd be two curiosities together. I don't understand what he means about that message. He can't have been in telegraphic communication with anything human, in the middle of the night, in a sea like this, and with us more than a thousand miles from the nearest land; the idea must be part of his complaint. Hang me, if I like these new fangled notions which are turning the whole world inside out; before some of these scientific chaps have finished we shall be holding conversation with old Nick at three-ha'pence a word."

On re-entering his cabin John Lennard found Mr Colenutt poring over a passenger-list and a plan of the ship; apparently with results which afforded him but slight satisfaction. Seemingly oblivious of the relations which he had hitherto maintained with his cabin associate he burst into a voluble, and, to Lennard, inexplicable statement of his grievances.

"I can't make it out; there's trickery somewhere; black treachery. There's not a mention of either of them here. Every cabin's occupied; the name of each occupant is clearly given; of nine-tenths of the people I have personal knowledge. Among the other tenth are none who look like them. And yet, that message was not a lie: I'll stake my soul that it was not a lie. They are on board; but in what disguise? and where? where?"

After dinner, on the day which followed, Mr Lennard was again on deck, and, as usual, alone. The unwritten edict, which had put him in Coventry, was still in full force; it afforded him a grim sort of amusement to notice how his advance served as a signal for other passengers to retreat. The weather had changed. The sea was now as calm as, twenty-four hours before, it had been perturbed. It was past ten o'clock: he was just meditating an immediate retirement to his berth, when the door of a deck cabin near which he was standing was opened, and a man came through it. He staggered, rather than walked down to the rail against which Lennard was leaning, swaying up against it like a man who was either drunk, or ill. At first Lennard supposed he was the former: but after a few moments' observation he concluded that that supposition was both uncharitable and unjust; the stranger was enduring mental or physical suffering. It struck Lennard that this was a case in which assistance might be required.

"I am afraid, sir, that you are not feeling very well. Can I be of service to you?"

The man turned to the speaker a countenance on which was an expression which resembled none which Lennard had ever seen upon a human face before. He was a tall, slightly built person, between thirty and forty years of age. He wore a dinner-jacket and no hat. He had curly brown hair, and slight side-whiskers and a carefully trained moustache. Not a bad-looking fellow, one fancied, in a general way. But now he was shivering as with ague; his cheeks looked drawn

and bloodless; his eyes were distended in a fixed, unnatural glare; the muscles of his face were twitching, his lips kept opening and shutting, as if he were the victim of some unpleasant form of St Vitus' dance. It was a second or two before he seemed able to speak; Lennard watched him with an uncomfortable consciousness of the extremely disagreeable spectacle which he was at the moment presenting. When he did speak his words were disjointed, disconnected; conveying an impression of distressing moral collapse:

"I'm feeling unwell, very unwell. I've had a shock, a shock. I've just seen a ghost, a ghost; the ghost of a person who, to my certain knowledge—to my absolutely certain knowledge—is thousands of miles away; and—it's unhinged me."

Evidently something had unhinged him. Mr Lennard smiled, scarcely sympathetically:

"Are you sure it was a ghost?"

The stranger, clutching the rail with both hands, tried to stand upright; but there was a weakness about the region of his knees which it was not nice to notice.

"Am I sure it was a ghost? Of course I'm sure. I don't believe in ghosts—as such; but this must have been a ghost, or something of the kind." He looked about him in a frightened, furtive fashion which suggested that he feared to find his spiritual visitant still in clear sight. "Don't I tell you that the person in question is thousands and thousands of miles away; couldn't be on board—couldn't be without my knowing it."

"Where did you see the—ghost?"

Plainly the stranger missed the ironical intonation which was in the inquirer's voice.

"Where? Looking at me, through my cabin window. I looked up, and it was there. I only saw it for an instant, and it—vanished. My God! it vanished."

The speaker reeled so that Mr Lennard feared he would have fallen to the deck; but as he moved forward to catch him the man saved himself by snatching at the rail. With the same uncanny mixture of surprise and horror he turned his head slowly round, as if fearful what his eyes might light upon.

"I think I'll go and get a drink," he stammered. "It might do me good: steady my nerves; they want steadying."

On that point there could be no doubt whatever; but

whether the remedy to which he alluded would have the desired effect was a question on which Lennard had his doubts: thinking it possible that the ailment from which he was at present suffering was at least partly caused by a too generous use of that very medicine. He watched the stranger feeling his way along the deck as if the intervening feet which lay between him and the cabin which he had recently quitted had been hedged about by unseen dangers.

"The fellow—from the way in which he behaves—might have delirium tremens," was Lennard's internal comment.

He passed into the cabin: and, within half-a-dozen seconds of his doing so there came from it a sound which made the watcher without hurry towards it as fast as he could move. It might have been a cry wrung from someone in an extremity of terror; or in the throes of physical anguish. Heedless of ceremony, without staying to knock, Mr Lennard thrust open the door and stepped inside. Instinct had warned him that something unpleasant might meet his eyes; but he was unprepared for what he actually saw.

On the floor lay a woman: her clothes all disarranged, wet with blood.

It was a good-sized cabin; a state-room, indeed; containing a couch from which she had apparently been dragged while struggling with her assailant, for the cushions had tumbled off it, and she was still clutching at one with the fingers of her right hand. She was a young woman, fair-haired, and wore a low-cut bodice; a fact which helped to make it plain that she had been stabbed, seemingly three or four times, in the region of the neck and breasts. The man in the dinner-jacket was standing perhaps a couple of feet from where she lay, in a crouching attitude, bending towards her, staring at her as if the sight of her had for him a dreadful fascination; all the time emitting sounds like some wounded animal.

A sudden conviction swept over Lennard that the whole thing had been pre-arranged; that, from the first, the intention had been to throw dust in his eyes; that the man whom he had been considering with a blending of pity and contempt was not only a dastard, but also an accomplished actor. He had committed the crime before he had originally issued from the cabin; the ghost which he had pretended to have seen was the body of this woman, which he had mangled with his own hands.

In full assurance that this was so, John Lennard laid his hand upon the wretched creature's shoulder. His voice was portentously calm.

"Don't imagine that you deceive me for one moment, with your histrionics. It was you who did this."

The man turned his quivering features towards his accuser.

"I did it? I? My God!"

The fellow's persistence in what the other regarded as hypocrisy moved him to righteous anger.

"Yes; you did it, you! How dare you call upon your Maker with your murderer's lips? If you play the hypocrite any longer you'll constrain me to take the law into my own hands, and wring your neck here, by your victim's side."

Indeed, he was about to take the trembling wretch by the throat, when a sound behind him caused him to swing round upon his heels, just in time to see a curtain moved aside, and a figure emerge from the recess which it screened, the figure of his cabin mate, the dark-skinned Mr Colenutt.

Although the unexpected sight filled John Lennard with not unnatural bewilderment, he kept his senses sufficiently to be conscious that it affected the man in the dinner-jacket almost as if he had been seized by a stroke of paralysis. Colenutt, on the other hand, seemed completely at his ease; much more at his ease than Lennard had hitherto seen him. There was a smile on his face; and he looked first at the man in the dinner-jacket, then at Lennard, with a light in his eyes, which lent to them a very singular expression.

For some seconds there was silence; Mr Colenutt seemed to be enjoying the situation too much to wish to do anything which might tend to bring it to a premature conclusion. So that Lennard was the first to speak.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ask him; he'll tell you."

Colenutt pointed to the man in the dinner-jacket with a hand in which there was a strip of polished steel, which John Lennard realised, with an odd sensation of disgust, was smudged with blood. Lennard questioned the gentleman referred to, as instructed:

"What does he mean? what is he doing here? what has this man to do with you?"

Mr Colenutt echoed the latter part of this inquiry in tones of mockery.

"That is the very gist and marrow of it all; what has this man to do with you?"

From the person to whom the query was addressed there only came some gibbering words by way of answer.

"It's a ghost! a ghost!"

Mr Colenutt laughed outright.

"I'm a ghost! a ghost! That's the crown and climax of it all?"

He threw his hands into the air—the blurred strip of steel flashing as it went—with a gesture which denoted genuine, if saturnine amusement; then addressed himself to Lennard; there being something in his manner and his words, and the effect which they both had on the man in the dinner-jacket, which suggested to his cabin mate a cat playing with a mouse:

"To you, sir, I shall have the pleasure, and the honour, of making all necessary explanations; I assure you that no explanation is required by the person behind you. He already understands quite well; as you have only to glance at him to see. Although, for the moment, he is a little tongue-tied, his looks are eloquent. You ask what have I to do with him. I will tell you in a single sentence: I am his wife."

"His wife!"

"His wife."

The pseudo Mr Colenutt raised his right hand: brushed something from his face, with some appearance of difficulty; withdrew something from his head, with one quick movement; moustache and wig had vanished, a mass of black hair had tumbled loose, and there, in front of John Lennard, though still clothed as a man, was the woman he had seen in his dream. The transformation was so startling, so unlooked-for, so complete, that Lennard stood staring at her as if spell-bound; the woman observing his amazement with an appearance of real enjoyment.

"You see, it is very simple: Now you perceive why I objected with so much vigour to having to divide with you my cabin. They told me, when we started, that I should have it to myself; I did not expect that we should pick up, in mid-ocean, another passenger, to whom would be allotted half. I beg you, however, to believe, that it was not to you, personally, that I objected; but merely to your sex. For that I entertained so strong a resentment that I resolved, at all and every cost, to be rid of you. I planned a little scheme;

robbed a woman of her trumpery knick-knacks; secreted them in your berth—you will find them there! determined to fasten on you the guilt, and so be able to claim exemption from your society, on the ground that you were a proven thief. For that misconduct—which went no farther than the inception—I entreat your pardon."

She inclined her head in a sweeping obeisance, which again had in it more than a touch of mockery. When she continued, although she scarcely raised her tone, she spoke with an intensity of bitterness, increasing as she went on; disclosing a relentless, persistent, remoreless singleness of purpose, which suggested that, for her, the boundary line which marks the division between the sane and the insane had some time ago been passed.

"You will understand, then, that I am the wife of the person who still is at the back of you; I have been his wife these thirteen years. He won me when I was a child; won me with a lie; oh, he lied in the first sentence which he spoke to me! I have known him, from the beginning, as a liar; and, afterwards, as a coward, a traitor, and a thief. It is incredible that, in spite of his notorious virtues, I should have continued to love the creature; but then I would urge on my own behalf that it is only lately I have learnt to what logical lengths those virtues really went. I discovered that he was carrying on an intrigue with another woman; this time, a woman after his own heart. When he found that I had found him out he fled, and she fled with him; he carrying, as ballast. such properties of mine as were within his reach, so that he left me nearly beggared. Almost as soon as they were away I was at their heels; and I kept at their heels as they passed, like wandering pariahs, from place to place. Although they did not know that I was there, for I had become a man—they were not likely to connect Colenutt, the mulatto, with the woman they had betrayed, fooled, ruined—still I fancy they were conscious that a malign influence was hovering close at hand, for they kept continually moving on; until, one day, they slipped clean through my fingers.

"How they managed it I don't know even now—whether it was by accident or design—but I woke one morning to find that they had vanished, to all seeming, into the air; that I had lost trace even of their tracks. It was only the other day I heard that they had gone to Europe.

"To Europe! Again and again I had asked him to take me to Europe; always some plausible excuse, some excellent reason why our visit should be postponed to a future period. But she, she had only to hint a wish for a thing: he tumbled over himself in his haste to get at her.

"Within six hours I also was travelling to Europe. My informant could not tell me by what boat they had booked, or when; he only knew that they had gone. When I secured the last cabin left upon the *Cormorant* I did not dream she carried them, they had booked under one alias; I under another; for private reasons of our own we kept ourselves inside our cabins: only last night, as you know, a message came to me by the Marconi telegraph, telling me that they were actually within my reach. It is but a minute or two since I learnt just where to put my hand upon them. I looked through that window, and saw him kissing her, making love to her upon the couch. I rapped at the pane. He turned and saw me; came out to see who I was, what I wanted. As he went out I came in, and, I left her, where, and as you see her now. She is not so full of life, and movement, nor of love, as when she first began to discover how sharp a knife I had.

"Would you not like to kiss her—to make love to her—again?"

She hurled, rather than addressed, this question to the palsied wretch who still was cowering beside the couch; then, dashing forward, passed Lennard, and, seizing the man in the dinner-jacket by the throat, began raining blows upon him with her knife as fast as she could raise her hand. As quickly as he could Lennard, gripping her arm, wrested her weapon from her. But, by then, her victim's clothes were saturated with his own blood.

"You have murdered him, you harridan!"

"Murdered him! I have murdered no one. I have executed justice."

Before he guessed her intention she had whirled herself out of his hold, and through the cabin door. He followed her on the instant; and yet was only just in time to see her scramble over the vessel's side, and vanish overboard.

The action was witnessed by a score of persons. Half-a-dozen life-buoys were tossed towards her into the sea. The ship was stopped; a boat lowered. But, although all possible

haste had been used, valuable time had been lost; the night was dark; in falling she might have struck against some portion of the vessel, and sunk into the depths like a stone.

Certain it is that the boat returned to the ship without having seen any sign whatever of Mr Colenutt.

CHAPTER XI

DAVID CURTIS

GEORGE OTWAY was contemplating something which was in a glass on a table in front of him in the smoking-room of his Liverpool hotel. He had been in England a week and as yet got no farther than his port of landing. He was not regarding the liquid with an air of undue conviviality; indeed, there was an expression on his face which distinctly was not jovial. In fact, he was not enjoying himself so much as he had intended—he had been arriving at that conclusion gradually during the past seven days. When he said good-bye to the *Cormorant* he had said to himself that now he would have an excellent time; one which, for enjoyment pure and simple, would take some beating. So completely had realisation fallen short of anticipation that he felt convinced that he had never had a more miserable week in the whole of his life.

He was homesick, positively. He thought of High Dene and its hitherto unappreciated beauties with something almost approaching to tenderness; of Dollie Lee, that faithless jade; of Frank Andrews, that scoundrel of a cousin. After all, he had been a bit of a fool. Why had he thrown away his position?—the grandest a man could have—for this sort of thing. And he glared at the something in the glass. The hue and cry after the Vauxhall Junction murderer had died away; but, no doubt, the reward was still on offer, and there were plenty of people who might be able to recognise Jacob Gunston if they met him face to face. Somehow, the idea of that possibility did not commend itself to him at all. Then there was that Thornton girl—the Elsie of that unforgetable episode upon the island; in a sense, she was the most unsatisfactory part of the whole business. What had become of her? Whither had she vanished? Why, above all! why had she left behind her so unescapable a memory?

She occupied his thoughts in a fashion he resented. If

anyone had hinted that she was in the neighbourhood of the North Pole he would have started off in search of her to-morrow. The mischief was that he had not the faintest notion in what quarter it would be wise to even commence his explorations; and that angered him, because he wanted her—just to talk to, to look at, and to go over old times together—for nothing else, he was certain. One Dollie Lee was woman enough for him; never again would he become the victim of feminine wiles. Never, never, never! Not if he lived to be as old as—oh, older than Methusaleh!

None the less, just for half-an-hour's quiet conversation with the girl whose eyes were at the same time both grave and smiling, he would have done about anything or gone anywhere. The consciousness that he had not an inkling whereabouts to begin to look for her made him—well, he had a sort of a kind of feeling that it might relieve his feelings to some extent if he were to hurl his soda-water tumbler at the first inoffensive stranger who might chance to catch his eye.

The fact that a hand was suddenly laid upon his shoulder made him reach forward to grab at his tumbler with a vague notion that here, at last, was an object on which to vent his spleen. But when he saw who the person was who had touched him he relented, therein showing more sense than he was himself aware of. A brown-haired youth was standing at his back. He was dressed in a suit of what looked like grey alpaca. The inevitable Panama hat was on his head, with the brim turned down behind and up in front, quite in the orthodox way. A briar pipe was between his lips. On his face, in his eyes, was something which suggested that, at any rate at the moment, he was much more disposed towards conviviality than the man he had accosted. At first Otway—whose thoughts were elsewhere—could not recall exactly who he was; then the youngster's tongue gave him the clue.

"Hollo, Lennard! Doing the giddy all by yourself?"

George Otway remembered. The newcomer was a lad named David Curtis. He had been one of the passengers on the *Cormorant*, who, after the sequel of the Colenutt incident, had shown willingness enough to fraternise. Curtis had been born in Canada, of English parentage. His father was dead. He had persuaded his mother to accede to his desire to complete his education at an English university. He was on his way to Cambridge—apparently still on his way. Otway,

not slow to read the meaning of the something which was on the young gentleman's face, thought it possible that that slight circumstance might have slipped his memory; but he was wrong.

"I fancied you were at Cambridge."

"I'm down for the Long."

"Down for the Long? What do you mean? It's hardly more than a week since I saw you."

"My dear chap, you don't understand: the 'Varsity's down for the Long, and I'm a member of the 'Varsity. I've been up; entered my name on the books; paid the necessary fees; and have become a duly qualified undergraduate of Trinity College, Cambridge. So I thought I'd come back to Liverpool and have a look round before going on to town. Let me introduce my two friends, Mr Howard and Major O'Callaghan: they've been helping me to celebrate. You two boys, this is Mr Lennard."

Whereupon Otway learnt that the two individuals in the background were the lad's associates. He had been celebrating: there could be no doubt whatever about that. But if they had been his assistants in the sense he intended to convey, —their share of the celebration had not affected either their demeanour or their appearance. Otway told himself on the instant that two less desirable companions for a young gentleman who was a solitary stranger in a strange land he had not recently had the pleasure of encountering. They were both immaculately dressed, though there was a trifle too much colour in the major's necktie and too much jewellery about his person. They had the surface manners of good-breeding: as Otway was soon to learn, they had well-bred voices. Yet the mere fact of the company they were in spoke volumes. They were both middle-aged; had about them such an unmistakable air of being men of the world, men of the worst side of the world in a moral sense, that one was driven to wonder what men of their experience could find attractive in the society of a raw Colonial youth; and the answer was not flattering to their standard of what was nice conduct on the part of men of honour. Although young Curtis did not realise that it was so, they evidently objected to Otway's looks as much as he could have done to theirs. Compared to the warmth of the youngster's manner their enthusiasm was sadly to seek. He drew their attention to the two empty chairs which were at Otway's table.

"Here you are, you fellows, there are two chairs for you. I'll get another for myself, we'll celebrate together. Hi! waiter! Hit that bell, that'll bring him."

The major laid his hand persuasively on the lad's arm.

"I don't think we'll stop, thank you, my dear David." Otway wondered if they had been the companions of the lad's childhood; or, if not, how long it had taken the major to reach the Christian name stage. "We shall be troubling Mr Lennard; and I would remind you that we had just arranged to continue the celebration at home. Come along! it's getting late! the longer we stop here the less time we shall have to celebrate, and I'm dying for a chance of showing you how that sort of thing ought really to be done."

The major had almost made a mistake in tactics. Curtis showed no particular inclination to act upon the other's hint.

"No hurry, old man! Sit down and make yourself comfortable! Lennard's an older friend of mine than you are —couldn't think of leaving him out when I'm painting the town red, especially when I'm so jolly glad to see him."

Otway reflected. He had still preserved the cognomen John Lennard, by which he had been known on the *Cormorant*. If he were an older friend than Major O'Callaghan, then that scarlet-necktied soldier must be a friend of very recent date indeed. Since, therefore, his friendship had advanced so rapidly to the "dear David" stage, it might, perhaps, be as well for the older friend to keep a watchful eye upon the youth, who had already been celebrating to a point which he would assuredly regret when the morning came.

The three seated themselves at Otway's table, Curtis ordering drinks with that air of lordly authority which only a very young man can assume, and he only when the conditions are propitious. Mr Howard and the major showed themselves to be as temperate in disposing of the contents of their own glasses as they were eager in encouraging the lad to empty his own.

"Drink up!" exclaimed Mr Howard, putting his lips to his own scarcely touched liquor, "and let's have another. You're not drinking, Mr Lennard."

"Nor are you. You apparently agree with me in allowing forty-five minutes for each *consommation*."

Mr Howard laughed, observing the speaker out of the corners of his eyes as he did so. In spite of his air of

almost ostentatious congeniality there was about him something which was very suggestive of looking out of the corners of one's eyes: one felt, somehow, that it was an act in which he was probably proficient.

"We should be a much more sober nation than we are if we all did that, and this sort of place would suffer. At any rate, it's not a principle of our friend's here; he likes to get through them at the rate of about twelve an hour, don't you, Curtis? Are you ready to recharge?"

"Rather. I always want to find out if the next drink is going to be better than the last. I didn't think much of that last one, if you ask me. There seems to be something about the whiskey which they give you here which reminds you more of the chemist than of the distiller!"

"Isn't that a fault on the right side, Curtis? They say that there's nothing like medicine for doing you good, and you know medicine comes from the chemist."

"Yes, my hat!—and so does poison!"

"I'm inclined to think, Mr Curtis, that you'll find this whiskey poison. If I were you I should cease to swallow it."

"There I'm with you, Mr Lennard. You know, Howard, the stuff they give you here is filthy—a headache in every sip. Let's clear out of this! My dear David, if you want to taste something which does suggest the distillery you come with me. I'll give you some of the finest whiskey you ever tasted: there's nothing like it to be got in England."

"Where do you want me to come to?"

The same question had been floating through Otway's mind.

"Why, to my house, my dear David. I've got a little place over at Sefton Park—well, I don't want to boast, so you come and see it; you'll find it snug enough—and Howard here will tell you that I know how to treat a friend."

"There's not the slightest doubt in the world that you know how to treat a friend, O'Callaghan, especially a friend of a certain kind."

The sneer was so marked, so unconcealed, that nothing could bear more eloquent testimony to the condition the lad was in than the fact that he failed to notice it. The major, more sensitive, shot a glance at his associate which hinted that he probably did know how to treat a friend of a certain kind; and, under a veil of elaborate courtesy, his answer conveyed as much.

"My dear David, Howard's quite right—quite right! I do know how to treat a friend of a certain kind, and he has every reason to know it too. But come! we're wasting time; let me pay for the drinks and get out of this place, I don't like it at all."

With sublime unconsciousness young Curtis suddenly drew a herring across the scent which the hospitable Major was so diligently pursuing.

"Are you coming with us, Lennard?"

"Coming with you to Major O'Callaghan's residence in Sefton Park? Hardly, since I have not been asked."

"Oh, that's all right; you needn't make any bones about that. The major's game to ask anyone who's a pal of mine, aren't you, old chap? Tell Lennard he's to come right along with us."

Not impossibly Major O'Callaghan had had some experience in the sometimes difficult art of schooling one's countenance, but even he was unable to prevent his face from showing what a very unwelcome proposition his young friend had made. He looked at his associate—a look which was full of meaning! He looked at the lad; he looked at the individual whom that young gentleman proposed to thrust upon him in such a singularly unceremonious fashion, and there was that in the manner in which—after a long, steady, and not over civil inspection—he withdrew his eyes, which convinced George Otway that he did not like the look of him at all. In that too friendly fashion, which struck Otway as being, in a gentleman of his sort, his weakest point, he laid his hand caressingly on the youngster's shoulder.

"My dear David, on this occasion I want to devote my whole energies to entertaining you." Otway believed that—heartily. "On some other occasion I shall be only too glad to have the pleasure of Mr Lennard's company; and for this evening, doubtless, he has other engagements. Come along, this place is giving me a headache."

"I sha'n't go unless Lennard does. If you don't want my friend you don't want me."

There was a directness about this which took the major aback, and which provided Mr Howard with an opportunity to show that he was a man of resource.

"That's the way to put it, Curtis: to-night we'll all keep in the same boat. And, anyhow, four's better than three. Per-

haps, Mr Lennard, you'll do me the honour of coming to my place for a cigar and a taste of the creature. I can't pretend to offer you the sort of thing my friend has, but to what I have you're very welcome."

The major was quick to take the other's cue. Otway was conscious that in a contest of that sort he was not likely to be beaten.

"Nonsense! I was only thinking that perhaps Mr Lennard wouldn't relish such an abrupt invitation. If Mr Lennard goes anywhere he comes to me; mayn't I hope it, Mr Lennard?"

"Thank you; I shall have much pleasure in going where Mr Curtis goes, if I may."

There was an intention in the words which Otway felt was not lost upon his listeners, and which they did not relish, though they showed no inconsiderable skill in concealing their distaste. The major's manner was sugar itself.

"Very good of you to take it like that, Mr Lennard; very good indeed. Now, if we're all ready, suppose we make a start. It'll have to be a question of a couple of cabs. I'll go on with David in the first one, and you, Howard, follow with Lennard in the other."

Again Mr Curtis was in opposition. Otway was half inclined to suspect that what he had drunk had not so much effect upon him as had at first appeared, for a semi-intoxicated man he seemed to be preternaturally keen in detecting what might be at the back of the major's mind. So soon as he had spoken Otway perceived that, if the associates chose, the major might take advantage of the two-cab arrangement to have the lad all by himself after all, and the same idea might have occurred to the boy.

"No, you don't. You and Howard can go together. I'll follow with my friend Lennard, if you'll tell me where we're to come to."

Again the colleagues exchanged glances, which again were pregnant with meaning. Once more Mr Howard suggested another way.

"We'll go four in a growler: that'll be the most sociable way of doing it."

They went four in a growler, though the drive could hardly be described as having been quickened by the spirit of sociability. So soon as they had started Mr Curtis began to

demonstrate that he was passing through the usual stages which mark a certain type of man who has been drinking heavily: he became argumentative, quarrelsome, even pugnacious, showing a ridiculous inclination to rush headlong over the road along which they would have been content to gently lead him.

"You said you could play poker—poker! Only this afternoon you told me you could play poker."

This was to Howard who was blandness itself.

"I mentioned that I had seen the game played."

"Then I say you haven't. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it. I say you haven't! No one in England has; not poker, not real poker!"

"Of course, we unfortunate Britishers understand that the game had its origin on the other side of the water."

"Oh, you do understand so much, do you? Then you can understand something else; you can understand that I play poker, real poker! Do you doubt it?"

"Not for a single instant."

"Because I'll just show you if you do, and I'll teach you a lesson."

"I shall be very happy, Mr Curtis, to receive instruction at your hands."

"Oh, you will be, will you? Then you shall have it. I'll teach you, too!"

This was addressed to Otway, who was seated at his side.

"With Mr Howard I shall be delighted to be taught; though, again with Mr Howard, I have seen the game played."

"I daresay you have; I don't say you haven't; you've knocked about the world. But I'll bet you've never seen it played as I play it."

"I think that's extremely possible."

There was a dryness about the speaker's tone which moved Howard to sudden laughter, and the laughter moved the young gentleman to something like wrath.

"What are you laughing at? There's nothing to laugh at that I can see, unless you want to call me a liar, and if you do, perhaps you'll be so good as to say so right straight out!"

"My dear Curtis! I was only amused at Mr Lennard's modesty. He evidently doesn't need your telling to be aware that you can teach him something."

"And I can teach you something too! and likewise the

major !—though you do fancy yourselves ! You're perhaps not so clever as you think you are. You think you've caught a flat, I know !—think I don't know? But you can take it from me that, before the night's out, I'll show you you're mistaken."

Otway wondered, and was inclined to doubt. On board the *Cormorant* David Curtis had impressed him as being a decent, well-bred lad, and a fairly shrewd one. But now, only too plainly, decency and shrewdness had both gone by the board. George Otway was disposed to ask if it were really worth his while to save the hobbledehoy from being taught a lesson which might do him good. Then he remembered what the lad had told him—of how he had been brought up as a teetotaller in his Canadian home. Evidently the ingenious pair on the opposite seat had practised alike on his innocence and ignorance ; had induced him to drink by concealing what would be the probable result ; and this was the result. They had succeeded in turning a well-behaved youngster into an unmannerly boor ; had done it with an object in view. He did not like the idea of leaving them at liberty to achieve that object. He would baulk them, even if to do so it became necessary to throw the young gentleman he proposed to serve out of the window.

CHAPTER XII

THE HOUSE IN SEFTON PARK

THEY stopped in front of a house which, judging by the exterior, might have been unoccupied. There was not a light in any of the windows; apparently they were all shuttered. The major opened the door with a latchkey. A small hand-lamp burned in the hall, only just serving to relieve the utter darkness.

"Rather dim in here," remarked the host. "They never know when I may come home, so I tell them to only have just light enough to prevent my tumbling over things."

"It looks," observed Otway, "as if everyone had gone to bed. I hope we shall not be disturbing your family."

The major laughed.

"Not you! You'd find it hard to do it—no one in this house goes to bed till cockcrow."

Holding the lamp above his head he piloted the way upstairs, ushering them into a room on the first floor, at the back. It was a good-sized apartment, furnished in a style which nothing they had seen hitherto could have caused them to expect. It was well lighted by electric bulbs; there was a grand piano; fine engravings on the walls; an abundance of comfortable easy-chairs and lounges: all the appointments which go to the making of a handsome room. Otway looked about him, then at the host, and he smiled. The smile caught the major's eye.

"This is my little place, Mr Lennard; I hope you like it."

"Very cosy, major, and quiet. I should think that you could do what you liked in here and no one would be one penny the wiser."

"That's the charm of it; in a great city like Liverpool quiet's the essential thing. Now, my dear David, you shall sample that whiskey of which I was telling you." He went to a side table on which was a display of decanters and tumblers. "There, my boy, try that! You know good stuff when you get it; tell me if you ever tasted anything better."

Curtis drained the tumbler which he gave him at a draught.

"Perfect!—nectar!—real nectar! Major, that's worth a sovereign a glass; give me another."

The tumbler was refilled; the three elders attacked their glasses with much more discretion than the lad. The talk, for a few seconds, was desultory. Then the major brought it back to the point.

"Weren't you saying, my dear David, something about poker?"

"I should rather think I was. I said—and I say again—that I'll show you how to play poker—real poker—if anyone here is man enough to learn."

"Always ready, David, to be taught something I didn't know before. There's a pack of cards somewhere about the place, I feel sure there is."

The major proceeded to hunt for that pack of cards with an ignorance of its whereabouts which was pathetic. Here, there, everywhere he had to look before he found it, the find finally taking place at the back of a drawer in one of the cabinets.

"Knew there was one somewhere; was convinced of it. Ah, there's two packs, that's still better; need be no waiting; shuffle one while we play with the other. Will those cards do, David, to play poker with?"

He displayed the two packs with an air of the sublimest innocence.

"Of course they'll do—any cards will do—I've played with cards on which you couldn't count the pips for dirt. Look here, this isn't going to be any fool game, this isn't. See that! that's money, and plenty of it—good money—and this game's going to be played for money. Any man who wants to play will show his money before he starts."

Curtis took out of a letter-case a roll of bank-notes. Otway, who was standing near the two men, said to Major O'Callaghan:

"I need hardly point out that this lad is not in a fit condition to play poker for any considerable stakes."

Howard immediately swung round towards the lad in question.

"You hear that, Curtis? Your friend, Mr Lennard, says that you're not in a fit condition to play poker."

"I'm not, aren't I? Perhaps, Lennard, you'll tell me why."

"Because you've been drinking too much; a fact of which

those two persons are perfectly well aware, if you aren't. It was to them I was speaking, not to you. If they play with you in your present condition they'll be robbing you."

"Listen to me, Lennard—now you listen to me! I've been a teetotaller all my life, and this is the first time I've ever been on the drink, and I'm not drunk now. I'm not too drunk to play poker, and anyone who says I am is a liar. Now, you fellows, are you going to play, or aren't you?"

Howard shrugged his shoulders.

"In the face of what Mr Lennard has just now said it becomes rather a delicate question. Neither Major O'Callaghan nor I have any wish to sit down with you at a game which you are incapable of playing."

Curtis banged his fist against the table.

"Incapable of playing! Who says I am incapable of playing? You sit down there, Lennard, and I'll show you if I'm incapable of playing."

Howard struck in:

"I would prefer that Mr Lennard should do nothing of the kind. Since he evidently has been drinking I would suggest that he be requested to withdraw before he makes himself more offensive than he has done already."

"Let me advise you, Mr Howard, that I have no intention whatever of leaving this half-intoxicated lad at your mercy, no matter what form your suggestion may take."

The major endeavoured to play the part of pacifier.

"Now, now, gentlemen! let's have good fellowship, if you please. Your zeal on behalf of your young friend does you credit, Mr Lennard, but you are quite wrong in thinking that he would receive any injury in this house. Try this whiskey, and join me in drinking to a better understanding."

"Thank you; I have tried that whiskey, and I've noticed something very peculiar about its taste; perhaps you'll drink what's in that glass instead of me."

A curious look came into the major's eyes.

"What the devil, sir, do you mean to insinuate?"

"I mean to say, Curtis, that these men are a pair of professional sharps; and if you weren't blind drunk you'd see it for yourself. If they can help it they don't intend to let you out of this house until they've plucked and drawn you."

Howard moved forward.

"If you are not careful, sir, even drunkenness shall not serve as your excuse much longer."

Again the major essayed the rôle of peacemaker.

"Come, come! we've all of us been having a drop, that's about the truth of it; let's calm down a bit before we talk of playing. I tell you what I'll do, I'll introduce the soothing influence of ladies. I'll ask my wife to join us, and a young lady. My dear David, the most charming girl you've ever encountered, though she's a little——"

He finished his sentence by touching his forehead with his forefinger.

"Do you mean she's dotty?"

"Not dotty, my dear David, anything but that; only she was the victim of rather a singular accident, of which she is still feeling the ill effects. But I will fetch her, and you shall judge for yourself.

So soon as the major was out of the room Curtis, who had seated himself at a table, began fingering a pack of cards.

"I don't want to see any girls—my hat, I don't! I want to play poker!"

"But your friend, Mr Lennard, says that you can't play poker. He thinks that you are such an ass at it that for us to play with you would be rank robbery."

"Who cares what he thinks?—who cares? Come on, Lennard: if you're a man you'll come on, and I'll show you if I can't play poker! Here, give me some more to drink!"

"Not only sha'n't you have any more, but you sha'n't drink what you have."

Taking the glass from the lad's unresisting fingers he emptied the contents on to the carpet. Curtis stared.

"What did you do that for?"

"Haven't you palate enough to perceive that the stuff's doctored? I suspect the soda, not the whiskey, because I notice that your friend the major serves us out of one syphon and himself out of another."

If looks could have scorched, judging from the glances with which Mr Howard favoured the speaker, that gentleman would have been pleased to see George Otway turned into tinder.

"Only the fact that we both of us are guests in my friend's house prevents me from breaking every bone in your body, Mr Lennard."

"Then how fortunate it is for you that we happen to be in your friend's house, Mr Howard."

"Now no fighting, no fighting! Don't I tell you that I want to have a little game?"

Just as Mr Curtis—for the twelfth time—was proclaiming this fact in tones which were considerably above a whisper, the door opened, and there stood the major, ushering in two ladies. The first was a plump, black-haired, dark-eyed lady, who, although not in her first youth, still had not inconsiderable pretensions to good looks. The second was Elsie Thornton.

It was a moment or two before George Otway realised this fact. Although she had been so much in his thoughts of late—had, indeed, absorbed them during the earlier part of that same evening—at the instant his mind was in a world in which she certainly was not. Had he been invited to lay his finger on the event most impossible of occurrence he might almost unhesitatingly have laid it on just this thing. Therefore, when he saw, following in the foreign-looking woman's wake, a figure which he recognised—with what a force of recognition—his inclination was to believe that the stuff which he had been swallowing had affected him more than he had supposed—that he had put into his mouth that which had the power to rob him, not only of his brains, but also of his faculty of sane vision.

Elsie Thornton in such a house as this—such a den of robbers! such a haunt of vice! It could not be—the thought was monstrous; the idea of such an association too ridiculous, too horrible to contemplate.

And yet—it was she!

And not only was it she, but she was attired with a gorgeous splendour which presented her to him from a point of view of which he had never dreamed. In those island days he had not supposed she was so beautiful, so tall, so shapely, so instinct with grace, so rich in all those physical attributes for which the souls of even good women long. He had not imagined that in her nature had achieved so perfect an ideal of feminine loveliness.

He stared at her, spellbound, loth to believe his eyes, yet finding himself more and more compelled to admit that they were not lying. It dawned upon him, hazily, that the major was going through a form of introduction.

"Gentlemen, this is my wife, Madame O'Callaghan, and this is her friend, Miss Villiers."

Villiers? Was that the name by which he was introducing Elsie? He stood up; something in his throat seemed to be choking him; he bowed.

"Miss *Villiers*"—he laid an intentional stress upon the name—"and I have had the pleasure of meeting before."

Although he was not looking in his direction Otway was conscious that, as he said this, a startled look passed over the major's face.

"You and Miss Villiers have met before? Indeed. Where might that have been?"

"Miss Villiers will remember."

But it seemed that that was exactly what Miss Villiers could not, or would not, do. She regarded him intently, steadily, as one examines a person to whose identity one seeks a clue.

"Do you say that we have met before—you and I? Are you sure?"

"Is it possible that you can have forgotten?"

"I have forgotten; I can't remember you at all. Where was it that we met?—and when?"

A wave of pity, anguish, rage, swept over him. In her voice, her eyes, in the whole expression of her face, he saw what the fellow had meant, when speaking of her, by tapping his forefinger against his forehead. Something had happened to her; something which had deprived her of that clear intelligence which had been not the least of her charms; something which had left her mentally deficient, which had cut her off from the girl he had known and had transformed her into a different entity. In this fact lay the possible explanation of her presence there, and lent to it an added suggestion of hideous tragedy. He turned to the major.

"May I inquire, sir, how you became acquainted with Miss Villiers?"

It was the woman who answered, Madame O'Callaghan.

"What an extraordinary question to ask, Mr Lennard, and in what an extraordinary tone you put it. Why, Lottie and I have been friends for years; it is you who are making a mistake. You are mixing her up with somebody else. But, come! what are you people doing? I thought you were having a game."

Howard spoke.

"We thought of having a game. Mr Curtis has alluded once or twice to a game called poker."

Curtis waved in the air the pack of cards which he was still holding, keeping his eyes fixed upon Miss Villiers.

"Yes, poker! it's a game for men. I want to teach these fellows how to play it, but they are none of them men enough. Come along, Miss Villiers; let me give you a lesson or two."

Madame O'Callaghan laughed.

"Oh, she doesn't do anything like that, and doesn't want to, thank you. She's as innocent as a baby; aren't you, Lottie, dear? We leave cards for male things—like you."

The major struck in:

"I was thinking, my dear, that perhaps Miss Villiers might be induced to give us a little music before we began to play."

"Come, Lottie; sing them something—there's a pet!"

As the woman laid her hand upon the girl's bare white shoulder a shiver went all over Otway. There was about the woman just that atmosphere out of which a man would give the world to keep his feminine belongings. It sickened him to observe the smile with which she acceded to the other's request.

"What shall I sing?"

"Oh, something brisk; one of those lively things you do sing."

The girl sat down, and she sang a song which, at the moment, was the rage of the music-halls. A senseless, formless, vulgar thing, into which a notorious music-hall performer had breathed that wealth of prurient inference with which she decorated everything she touched. The girl had a lovely voice—a fact of which Otway had hitherto had no suspicion—and she sang the thing with an abandon which not only lent it added piquancy, but which also showed, at least to him, that she was unconscious of there being about it anything undesirable. A child might have sung it so. The conclusion was greeted with applause, especially from Curtis, who stamped his feet, clapped his hands, and shouted, precisely as he might have done in the hall in which it had had its birth.

"Bravo! bravo! Encore! encore! Give us another like it, Miss Villiers, do! That's the sort of song I like to hear a girl sing."

"It's not the sort of song which I like to hear a girl sing, nor is it the sort of song which you would like to hear a girl

sing if you were a little more sober, Curtis. It is not a song which a girl ought to be allowed to sing; and that you should permit, and even encourage, her to sing it is a fact, Madame O'Callaghan, of which you ought to be very heartily ashamed."

"Highty-tighty! My gracious! Did you ever! Major O'Callaghan, who is this person?"

It seemed that, at last, the major had succeeded in losing a part of his temper.

"I don't know who he is, I only know that he's a regular spoil-sport. And I should like to know what the devil he means by interfering with everything and everyone. I didn't want him here, he knows that well enough, and the sooner he takes himself off the more comfortable it will be for all of us, himself included!"

While the major glared, with the apparent, but quite futile, intention of awing Mr Otway, the girl put a question to the woman which served to fan the already smouldering ashes into a sudden flame.

"Is there anything wrong about that song? It was you who taught it me."

Madame emitted a sound which was possibly intended for laughter.

"Wrong! Stuff and nonsense! Didn't you hear what Mr Curtis said? That's the sort of song a girl ought to sing; isn't it, Mr Curtis?"

Seemingly the young gentleman was yet sufficiently sober to enable him to perceive, after due reflection, that there had been something peculiar about the thing.

"Well, it was a trifle blue."

"Blue?" asked the girl. "What's blue?" Then she continued, speaking to the woman: "You know you made me learn the words, though I told you that I thought that they were silly; then you took me to that place where the woman sang it, night after night, until I could sing it just as she did, and you said that I was always to sing it when there were any gentlemen in the room."

This unconscious revelation—for the girl had spoken as if she were some little child—of the relations which existed between the two, was more than sufficient to bring George Otway's mind to the danger point.

"It is as I suspected: there's some infernal conspiracy! You've got this girl into your clutches by some means which

I'll stake my life won't bear inspection; and, for your own base purposes, you're deliberately taking advantage of the condition she is in to corrupt and destroy her—proposing to trade upon her ruin, like the vile wretches you are! Elsie! Your name is not Villiers! Don't you remember what it is? Try and think, try! Don't you recollect me? and the days and weeks we spent together on the island! When I returned with the water I had gone to look for, and found you gone, I thought I should have none mad; and I believe that for a time I did go mad. Ever since I have been wondering to what corner of the world I could hasten in order to come on you again; and now that I have come on you again, in this—this dreadful place, you have forgotten who I am. Try to think, Elsie, it will—it must—all come back to you if you will only try to think."

It was the major who replied. The girl, with both hands pressed against her temples, was evidently making a piteous effort to pierce the invisible veil which hid from her the past.

"Miss Villiers does not remember you, for the sufficient reason that—as you know perfectly well—she has never set eyes on you before. But I'm not going to have any more argument with you, Mr Lennard; I've borne too much from you already. Are you going to leave my house inside ten seconds, or am I going to put you out?"

"I rather fancy, Major O'Callaghan, that if I am to leave your house without this lady you will have to put me out. Curtis, aren't you going to stand by me? This lady is a friend of mine whom, somehow, these brutes have got hold of and mean to ruin. You can see that she's not capable of taking care of herself. If you've a sister of your own think what that means! and are you going to sit still there and not move a finger to save her?"

"My hat! I'm not!" The young gentleman stood up; physically he was not a bad specimen of Canadian youth. "If what my friend Lennard says is true, you're a lot of blackguards; that's what you are, a lot of blackguards. And if you touch him you touch me; I'm game to fight the lot of you."

The major answered:

"What your friend says is not true; on the contrary, it's a tissue of falsehoods. Miss Villiers is an old friend of my wife's."

"I've known her since she was in short frocks," interposed the lady.

"As Miss Villiers?"

The question was Otway's. The lady resented it with a fine show of indignation.

"Look here, my fine fellow, you seem to think you know a good deal; so perhaps you're aware that a girl doesn't always want to use the name she was born with, for the very good reason that she doesn't want every cad to have it on the tip of his tongue. But if you won't take my word, perhaps you'll take hers. Lottie, haven't I known you since you were so high?"

Madame's right hand was raised perhaps three feet from the ground. Again the girl was plainly making a pathetic effort to remember.

"I think I've known you a long time."

"You hear? Will that do for you?"

"It will not; because, in her present state, a week may seem to her to be a long time."

"A week! Why, she's scarcely been out of my sight for the last five years."

"That, at any rate, I know to be a lie; and, as such, it's further proof that she has been, and still is, the victim of some villainous conspiracy. Three months ago she was thousands of miles away from here, and not many weeks before that she was with her father in her own home, where she has resided since she was a child. I insist on your giving me an exact—and accurate—statement of how she came into your hands: that statement I shall at once lay before the police. You will also allow her to be examined—and that immediately—by medical men of my selection. Or, if you are unwilling to comply with my demands, you will surrender her into my charge, and I will take instantaneous steps to place myself in communication with her friends."

The woman looked him up and down, as if she found herself, at the moment, without any language at her command which would be adequate to the requirements of the position. Then she proceeded to express herself in idiomatic English.

"Well, you're a cool card upon my word! Is there anything else you would like?—the top brick off the chimney?—or the nose off my face?—or any little trifle of that kind? Always willing to oblige, I'm sure, but you're a bit too steep; you

really are." She turned to her husband. "Do you know that this fellow called me a liar? Is that the sort of language you intend to allow a perfect stranger to use to your wife in your presence, Major O'Callaghan? — and in your presence, Mr Howard?"

Otway stuck to his guns.

"Don't attempt to bluff me, woman! Are you going to comply with my request at once, or am I to summon the police?"

"Oh, he's going to summon the police now — he'll be locking us all up next.—What do you think of this, Major O'Callaghan?"

The major informed her:

"I don't think anything at all of it, and you needn't either. The man's a rare old chatterbox; but that's about all there is to it. You withdraw with Miss Villiers. Miss Villiers, I must apologise to you for this unfortunate, and wholly unlooked-for, incident, and can only express my deep regret that I should have been unwittingly to blame for it. When you have gone, my dear, Howard and I will deal with this gentleman."

Madame moved towards the door. Otway interposed.

"Don't you attempt, woman, to take the young lady out of this room without my permission, or you will regret it. Curtis, look to the door; let no one pass. Who did that?"

Someone, by switching off the electric light — without a moment's notice—had plunged the room into sudden, utter darkness. For a few seconds there was wild confusion. Taken wholly by surprise, bewildered, Otway dashed in the direction in which he supposed Miss Thornton was, only to come crashing against a heavy piece of furniture and to clutch with his hands at the vacant air. Startled, shaken, he stood for an instant to listen, every faculty on the alert. He thought that he heard the swishing of skirts upon his right, and went rushing towards the spot from which it seemed to him that the sound proceeded, with the result that, tangling his feet in some obstacle which lay across his path, he fell headlong to the floor, shouting at the top of his voice as he descended:

"Confound it! Those brutes have laid a trap! Curtis, where are you?"

The lad's voice came back to him through the darkness.

"I'm here all right—what's left of me. Is that you breaking up the happy home? Go easy, or you'll bring the whole place down about our ears. Major! Howard! this is beyond a joke; let's have some light—where are you?" There was an interval of silence, then the youngster's voice again: "My hat! Lennard, old man, it strikes me that they've done a scoot—I believe that you and I are alone in the room together. Haven't you got such a thing as a match upon you? —because if you haven't, why we're done—hanged if I can find my matchbox anywhere."

Otway proved that he had a match by striking one. Its flickering flame was enough to show that Curtis's conjecture was correct, and that they had the entire apartment to themselves; the quartette had slipped out of it under cover of the sudden darkness. Otway recognised that it was so with much dissatisfaction.

"I'm hanged if they haven't tricked us! One of the men turned off the light, and the woman spirited Elsie out of the room under our very noses. You can bet your life that they've played this trick before; they've brought it off too neatly for it to be a first attempt. This is a pretty hole in which you've landed me and a pretty den you've brought me to."

"I brought you's good—you would come."

"Oh, confound all that, don't make a bigger ass of yourself than you've done already. They can't have got far away; we ought to have them yet. This match is burning my fingers. Where's the switch for that electric light?"

"That's more than I can tell you—light another."

Otway lit another. Curtis moved to the door.

"I believe they've locked us in."

"Locked us in!" Otway rushed to him, to find that the door opened readily enough. "You turned the handle the wrong way, or something." They were standing on what they perceived, by the light of the match, to be an uncarpeted landing. "I shouldn't be surprised if the one we've just come out of is the only room in the house that's furnished. We've landed ourselves in a regular pirate's lair. I noticed as we came up them that there was no carpet on the stairs and that the hall was empty. Hi!—upstairs there!—where the devil are you?"

No information was returned. Curtis hazarded a suggestion:

"I rather fancied, as we were messing about in the darkness, that I heard someone tearing down the stairs, and that then the door was shut with a bang."

Otway snapped at the young man by way of thanks.

"Why couldn't you say so before? Wasting valuable time! Of course, that's what they've done; they've got clear of the house and left us to get on their track if we can."

They descended to the hall, to learn that the front door was fitted with a patent lock which required understanding, especially when it was manipulated for the first time by the light of a succession of refractory and short-lived matches. By the time they succeeded in opening it both the gentlemen stood in urgent need of the cooler air which awaited them without. So soon as they were on the step the door closed behind them with a click, and for the first time they discovered that they were without their hats. This delayed the process of cooling off.

"Now we're shut out!" raged Otway. "We can't get back if we want to, and they may still be inside, peeping at us out of one of the windows, for all we know. As for hunting them through the streets, after the start they've got we might as well look for a needle in a haystack."

Curtis was pointing down the street, which was a long one.

"There's a cab going along there, anyhow; and, unless I'm much mistaken, someone has just jumped into it who has been watching us from the pavement!"

"Then we'll follow it!" cried Otway.

They followed it,—in vain. They kept it in sight round two corners; but, on turning a third, it was nowhere to be seen. With little spirit and less hope they plodded on until they came to a hansom which was standing outside a house. Otway accosted the driver.

"Have you seen two ladies pass?"

"In a hansom were they?"

"I daresay; which way did they go?"

"Why, they came along here not two seconds ago; went round the next corner, the hansom did."

"You catch that hansom, and it's a sovereign in your pocket."

"I'll earn that sovereign, never you fear!"

But the driver did not earn that sovereign. He drove them on and on, and round and round, and here and there, and

goodness alone knew where—they didn't! But he never caught that hansom. It must be conceded to him, however, that he did catch other hansoms; several other hansoms. In not one of them—so it happened—were the two ladies whom the two gentleman were seeking.

CHAPTER XIII

SIGNOR ROCHAMBEAU CLAIMS HIS LEGACY

GEORGE OTWAY, *qua* John Lennard, had very little sleep on the night of the adventure of the house in Sefton Park. He spent some time in cursing himself, in many forms, for many things. Again and again he applied to himself every unflattering epithet he could call to mind for having allowed himself to be so egregiously tricked. That the girl who had lately occupied his thoughts to such a singular extent should have been snatched away from him at the very moment when she stood in such dire need of protection was bad enough. Almost worse was the fact—which only dawned upon him by degrees—that he had not the faintest notion of the actual whereabouts of the house in which it had all happened. The man who called himself Major O'Callaghan had spoken of his "little place over at Sefton Park." But Otway's knowledge of Liverpool was of the vaguest kind. He had not noticed in what direction the cab was being driven; it would have made little difference if he had. In their helter-skelter rush from the premises neither Curtis nor he had observed any number on the door; they had not taken the trouble to learn the name of the street it was in; they had even contradictory ideas of what the street looked like. Curtis had it that it was a street of red-brick houses; Otway was convinced that they all had stucco frontages. He was prepared to stand by his own impression. But, still, to go to the police with a wild tale about an unknown house in an unknown street of stuccoed houses!—in a town like Liverpool!—it might well be that the authorities would require something more definite to go upon before they would be disposed to move.

For, unwilling though he was, for various obvious reasons, to come in contact with the police, it seemed to him that this was a case in which, for Elsie's sake, he would be compelled to apply for their assistance. He was just preparing to start

for the nearest police-station when someone knocked at his bedroom door, and, in response to his invitation to come in, it was opened, and a stranger entered. Otway, who had expected a chambermaid, or perhaps a waiter, regarded him askance.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

The intruder was a man of about forty. There was that about his well-worn suit of brown cloth which made it possible that he might be either a traveller in sewing-machines or a hairdresser's assistant. He put his soft felt hat under his left arm. From an inner pocket of his jacket he took a greasy letter-case, and from the letter-case what appeared to be an ancient five-pound note. This he extended for Otway's inspection, speaking with a strong foreign accent.

"Your name is John Lennard; not so? Good! You pay yesterday this bank-note. Well! I ask you where you get it from, because it is my property."

He recognised the note as one of those which he had found in the metal box on the Island of the Gate of Hell, with the strip of paper attached to the handle, bequeathing it, and its contents, to whoever might be its finder. He had been subsisting on those contents since his return to civilisation, changing a note, or notes, as occasion required. The stranger's words, therefore, were sufficiently startling.

"Your property! What do you mean? Who are you?"

"I am Joseph Rochambeau. I am Italian. My father, he was also Italian. He kept a restaurant, my father. He made a fortune. Although he was so fortunate he could hardly read or write; he knew nothing of banks, and would know nothing. Every time he got a bank-note he put it in a box. One day the box was stolen, with all his fortune inside. He went to the police, but nothing was discovered. All he had left was a book in which he had entered the number of every note as he put it into the box. That book he gave to me."

Otway had been attentively observing the speaker, noticing, in particular, what shifty eyes he had. Of course, his tale might be true; but there was that in his appearance which suggested most distinctly that it might not.

"This is a very sad story of yours, Mr Rochambeau."

"It broke my father's heart; it killed him; oh yes!"

"Did it affect him to that extent? That makes it sadder. And when did this robbery take place?"

"Oh, a long time ago; forty or fifty years."

"And do I understand you to say that your father gave you that book of which you speak at the time of the robbery? You bear your years remarkably well, Mr Rochambeau."

"At the time of the robbery I was not born, no! When my father died he gave the book to my mother, I was then a very little child. She did not live long; then it came to me. Here it is."

He held out what looked like an ancient penny account-book.

"I see. That is how it was. Then you have yourself no actual knowledge of the robbery."

"I hear my father talk about it many a time, and my mother also; oh yes."

"And you can give me the precise date on which it took place."

"Not at the moment. I must refer. But that will be very simple."

"No doubt. In the meantime, how do you connect me with your father's missing property?"

"Yesterday I call upon a friend who keeps a restaurant. He says to me: 'Joseph, I have to-day had paid to me a bank-note which is so old it might have been one of those which was stolen from your father'; my friend knew my father very well and all about his great misfortune. He showed me the note. I take out my book which I carry always, always! There, in it, was the number of the note which my friend had received. Here it is; you can see for yourself."

Mr Rochambeau held out the note and his book. On the open page, about the middle of a long list, in very faded writing, was a number which was identical with that which was on the note. Otway felt that, to say the least, the coincidence was curious. The Italian went on:

"The note was endorsed: 'John Lennard, Exchange Hotel.' When I come last night you were not in. So I am here again this morning, as soon as possible, to learn how the note—which, as you can see for yourself, is one of those which were stolen from my father—came into your possession."

"Before I supply you with the information which you say you require, Mr Rochambeau, you will have to satisfy me on one or two points. You will have to prove that the robbery

of which you speak really did take place, and then your title to the property which you allege was stolen. When you have satisfied me on those two points I will give you all the information you can possibly desire."

"You wish me to prove that my father was robbed, and that to my father's property I am the heir?" Otway nodded. "Good! it is simple! I will go and get you what you want, and in an hour I will return and find you here!"

Mr Rochambeau made, at any rate, one miscalculation: on his return he did not find Otway there.

So soon as the Italian's back was turned Otway's thoughts reverted to Miss Thornton. In a sudden flash there came to him an idea which he abused himself for not having hit on before. She had told him that her father was a Sussex parson. If so, nothing would be easier than to hunt him up in a clergy list, and to place himself in communication with him without delay. An old copy of the necessary clergy list he found in the smoking-room; within two minutes he was in possession of the required particulars. That was Elsie's father: The Rev. Marmaduke Branston Thornton, M.A., New College, Oxford, F.S.A., F.G.S., etc., Vicar of Dullington, Sussex. Nominal value of the living, £250 per annum. Actual value, about £150. Population, 981.

What an idiot he had been! There was everything as straightforward as possible. All he had to do was to—— Should he wire to the vicar of Dullington? or should he write? No; neither in a telegram nor a letter could he give all the explanations which would have to be given. The best plan would be a personal interview. He would go and see him at once. Too much time had been lost already. He hunted out a train in Bradshaw. One left for town in about five-and-twenty minutes. Could he catch it? There was no question of could about it—he must, and would. He threw his things into his bag, paid his bill, and was getting into a cab when someone touched him on the shoulder. A fat man, in glossy broadcloth, with shaven cheeks and iron-grey hair, who held his silk hat in his hand. Otway did not remember to have seen him before. He also spoke with a foreign accent.

"Pardon me, Mr Lennard, but my friend, Mr Rochambeau, expects to find you here on his return."

Then Otway recalled his visitor's words, that he proposed to return with the asked-for proofs within the hour. But the

departing traveller did not intend to allow himself to be delayed by a trifle of that sort.

"I'll let Mr Rochambeau have an address at which he can communicate with me. Can't stop now—have to catch a train. Lime Street, driver! Push along!—five minutes to do it in!"

The cabman left the broadclothed gentleman standing by the kerb, with his silk hat in his hand and an expression on his face which could scarcely have been called a smile, and he deposited his fare at Lime Street station well inside the stipulated five minutes. Presently Mr Otway was bowling along the North-Western metals towards London, and, as he hoped, towards Elsie Thornton's father.

The only incidents which marked the journey occurred at the three stations at which the train stopped. First, as they were leaving Crewe, a man's figure caught Otway's eye as he hurried past the window. It was that of someone whom he had seen quite lately. But he was not sitting at the platform end of the compartment, and, by the time he reached it and had his head out, the figure had vanished. Again at Stafford the figure passed. Although it was by no means cold, the man wore a long dust coat and a voluminous cap pulled over his eyes and ears. Otway was conscious that, as he passed, he paused for an appreciable instant in front of his own compartment, giving a swift, searching glance within. At Rugby Mr Otway was looking at a group of holiday-makers who were on his own side of the train, and, on turning suddenly round, found that the window at the other end was down, and staring in was—Mr Rochambeau. He was the man in the long dust coat! So soon as he perceived himself discovered the Italian slipped away. There were only a few seconds between his going and Otway's transferring himself to where he had been, but already he had vanished, there was not a sign of him to be seen.

"I suppose that grey-headed friend of his put him on the scent, and he's accompanying me to town. Perhaps he thinks I'm running away from him with his father's fortune! His father's fortune! That fiver may have belonged to his father once—though his tale's a queer one; but if he's going to lay claim to any more of the notes which were in that metal box, then I shall say that the fellow's more remarkable for impudence—and possibly ingenuity—than for anything else. It

can only be by a miraculous series of accidents that his father's fortune can have found its way to the Island of the Gate of Hell."

He lingered for a moment at Euston, eyeing the passengers as they descended from the various compartments, but of his Italian friend there was nothing to be seen. He formed his own conclusion.

"I daresay that at the game of espionage he is better than I am, and that he can see me when I can't see him. If he only knew it, he's losing a chance. If he's so anxious to have an interview as he seems, I shall be happy to oblige him with one in a cab across town."

He drove to Victoria in a hansom. Then, finding that he should have to wait nearly an hour for a train to Dullington, he had some lunch in the station dining-room. When he left Victoria it was nearly four o'clock. Although he had kept what he flattered himself was a keen eye about him, he had detected no signs of Mr Rochambeau being in the neighbourhood. He decided, therefore, that either he had lost him at Euston, or that, for reasons of his own, he had given up the chase.

The train by which he travelled was a slow one—there were no fast ones to Dullington. That remote hamlet lay on the opposite side of the county to his own High Dene. Still, the country he was entering was one with which he had been familiar for many years. It was with an odd feeling that he was returning, as from the grave, to something which he had supposed himself to have left for ever that he felt the train glide from the platform. Beyond, not many miles away, were the broad lands of which he was lord, the palatial house which he had rendered famous. Was his cousin there? And Dollie Lee? What had they made of the tangle out of which he had slipped? Had they been as false to each other as they had been to him? He thought of the look which had been on their faces when he saw them last. If they had installed themselves in his place at High Dene, clothed themselves with his power and his majesty, what would their faces look like when—at his own time—he rose from the dead. For them, then, the day of judgment would have come indeed.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE TRAIN

WHILE he was still pondering such matters the train entered Clapham Junction. So far he had had the first-class compartment in which he was to himself. Just as the train was restarting the door was torn violently open and someone came bundling in. So engrossed was he with his own imaginings that until they were clear of the station he did not trouble to see what manner of man it was who had caught the train, as it were, by the skin of his teeth. When he did he discovered, to his unqualified amazement, that it was Harvey, the husband of his landlady at Clapham Junction; the drunkard and the wife-beater; the man who, sharing his wife's mistaken notion that he was Jacob Gunston, "the Vauxhall Junction murderer," had set the police, and with them all England, on the hunt for him. No encounter could have been more unfortunate. The man had only to call attention at the next station to his presence, and he would find himself in custody on a charge which would involve all sorts of delays and uncomfortable explanations before he would be able to make clear his innocence.

Mr Harvey's surprise was plainly equal to his own. He stared at his companion as if, instead of being a natural being, he had been some creature of phantasy. When, however, he had decided that he was real, words came from him with a gasp.

"Mr Scott! Jacob Gunston!"

"Pardon me, Mr Harvey, but, as I would have explained to you on a previous occasion, had you allowed me, I am not Jacob Gunston."

Otway's manner, which was suavity itself, seemed to convey to Harvey's mind the impression that he was conscience-stricken.

"Tell that for a tale! Do you think that you can deceive me by lies of that kind? Do you think that I can't see that

you are shivering and shaking at the prospect of the policeman who will soon have his hand upon your shoulder and his bracelets round your wrists?"

"You must have keen eyes, Mr Harvey, if you can see that, especially as I myself am conscious of no feeling of the kind."

"Oh, you've assurance enough to brazen it out, I don't doubt; it doesn't need you to tell me that you're a brass-bound as well as a blood-stained scoundrel. But, all the same, you know as well as I do that, at last, your time has come, and that in a few minutes you'll be on the high-road towards paying the penalty for the crime which set all England shuddering."

"Your language reminds me of an old-fashioned melodrama, Mr Harvey: it's a trifle turgid."

"You laugh at me, do you! You jeer, you infernal villain! You won't jeer long, and you'd better laugh your laugh out; it's the last you'll ever have, unless you're the sort that laughs at the sight of the gallows. You got away once—with the help of that jade of a wife of mine! I paid her for it, I promise you; associating herself with such a brute as you. But she's not here to help you a second time. If you so much as try to move I'll stop the train and set everyone in it on to you. I tell you, my lad, that it won't be long before you're looking on the police as your protectors. If the people could get at you they'd tear you limb from limb."

Before this Mr Otway had understood that if this quondam landlord was not yet in the condition in which he had been wont to see him—absolutely drunk—he had at any rate been drinking. Doubtless, in the case of so experienced an absorber of alcohol, it was necessary that he should consume an abnormal amount of liquor before he became drunk in the policeman's sense. If that stage lay farther on he had already arrived at a condition in which neither his language nor his actions would be such as might be expected from a perfectly sober man; for instance, he was capable, on very slight provocation, of stopping the train and making the scene of which he spoke. Otway, quietly observing him, made up his mind that, at any—and all—costs, that sort of thing, should be prevented. He was quite resolved to journey to Dullington a free man.

He waited a second or two after Mr Harvey had finished his rodomontade, then he put a question:

"May I ask, sir, what it is you propose to do?"

"You may ask, but I'm not bound to answer; no man's bound to answer questions put by such scum of the earth as you are; but I don't mind telling you just to give you warning. The next station we stop at's Sutton. Directly we get there I shall put my head out of the window, and I shall beckon to a porter, and I shall say to him, pointing to you: 'Porter, this scoundrel, this confounded villain's Jacob Gunston, the bloody-minded ruffian who killed that poor girl in the railway carriage at Vauxhall Junction. There's £100 reward offered for him. I nearly earned it once; this time I'll earn it quite. You fetch a policeman, and we'll have the darbies clapped on him and settle his hash for good and all!' That's what I'll say to the porter, and that's what I propose to do; and as sure as you're alive—and will probably soon be dead"—this with a suggestive grin—"I'll do it."

"Am I to understand, then, that you intend to carry out this agreeable little programme on our arrival at Sutton?"

Mr Harvey did not seem to notice that the inquirer's tone was almost ominously civil. His tone was, if anything, even more blusterous than before.

"You are; you're to understand it down to the ground. So perhaps you're beginning to feel as if the rope were already round your neck, and the drop-board falling away from underneath your feet, Mr Jacob Gunston."

Tilting his hat on to the back of his head, thrusting his hands into his pockets, leaning back in his corner, Mr Harvey regarded his companion with a smile of malignant triumph, and that same instant Mr Otway stood up. Whereupon Harvey, forsaking his comfortable position, rose also. But he was not only the one vital moment behind the other—he was nothing like so quick. As he made to reach the alarm pull Otway, catching him by the throat, flung him back into his seat, and held him there. Held him there long enough to make one feel that if he held him any longer the eyes would start out of Mr Harvey's head, his mouth never shut again, and the purple veins burst through the skin of his blood-red face. Then he loosed him, having brought him as near to the strangulation point as was pleasant, and he placed himself on the seat opposite, his manner being courtesy itself.

"I doubt if you will carry out that little programme of yours, Mr Harvey, do you know."

Mr Harvey did not answer. He was struggling for breath in a fashion which was not nice to contemplate. When a bull-necked man, of a plethoric habit of body, and with a drink-sodden constitution, has been almost choked, he suffers when he first endeavours to relieve the pressure on his heart and lungs and about the region of the blood-vessels in his head. So George Otway repeated his remark.

"I observe that I am inclined to doubt if you will be able to carry out that little programme of yours, Mr Harvey."

The gentleman addressed managed, with an effort, to articulate two words.

"You ruffian!"

"Might I request you, when speaking to me, not to use words of that sort? I don't like them; I really don't."

Although nothing could have been more urbane than Mr Otway's tone, there was that in the fashion in which he moved a little forward in his seat, holding out his hands carelessly—and suggestively—in front of him, which had a rather curious effect on Mr Harvey. He looked as if he would have liked to have spoken, and with some vigour, but was afflicted with a sudden—and painful—consciousness that he had better not. The other went on:

"You will remember how I had to treat you to some physical persuasion when once you were having an argument with your wife? You need not trouble yourself to speak; you might find the effort painful. I see that the occasion is still fresh in your memory. You will recall the fact that you were as putty in my hands. I assure you that you will be no better off if circumstances should compel me to handle you now. You pretend to believe that I am a murderer, Jacob Gunston. I have already assured you I am not; so I will not touch upon that point again. I will merely mention that I object to your behaving as you have talked of doing on our arrival at Sutton; and rather than you should do so I will myself behave as if I were Jacob Gunston. I will squeeze the life right out of you. You understand? You will therefore give me your personal assurance that you will not speak, on any subject whatever, to a soul at Sutton or anywhere else without my express permission, or——"

He just touched Mr Harvey's throat with the tips of his fingers, and Mr Harvey submitted. He seemed to subside into inertness, as if the backbone had been taken clean out

of him, looking at the other with quivering gills and faltering eyes very much as an emasculate cur might regard the master whose anger it knows it has aroused. The change from the blusterer of a few seconds ago was as sudden as it was complete.

"I promise! I promise!"

"What do you promise?"

"That—that I'll do whatever you tell me."

"Ah, that's a better way of putting it; better even than my own way. As long as you keep to that you'll be happy. Now, in order to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding, suppose you come with me to the other end of the carriage. We shall be more by ourselves there, and farther from the noisy platform. Come, Mr Harvey, get up; keep your arms to your sides, and don't lean towards that alarm pull."

Thus instructed, Harvey moved towards the opposite end of the compartment, dropping, in accordance with further instructions, into the seat with the back to the engine. Otway, placing himself on the other side, regarded him with something like amusement.

"Now we're comfortable, aren't we?" Anyone looking less comfortable or more unhappy than Mr Harvey did then one could hardly imagine. "If it's not an impertinence, may I ask at what station you propose to alight?"

"I'm going to get out at Sutton."

"At Sutton? Oh dear! that won't suit me at all. I couldn't allow myself to be deprived of your society so soon."

"I must get out at Sutton. I've an important business appointment at five."

"Have you? That's unfortunate, because you can't get out at Sutton. Because, you see, if you did, so soon as you fancied yourself out of my reach, you might forget your promise and blurt out something foolish, and all sorts of unpleasantness might ensue. I couldn't think of losing you at Sutton; altogether out of the question. Let me see. I fancy this train runs to Littlehampton. The Littlehampton sea-breezes might do you good. You might go on to Littlehampton. I must make some arrangements which will ensure your keeping silence until you get to Littlehampton. I must think it out. By the way, how is your wife, Mr Harvey?"

"She's in hospital."

'Is she indeed? I suppose you sent her there. How comes she to be in hospital, Mr Harvey?"

"Tumbled down the stairs!"

"Fortunate woman! With, I take it, your assistance."

"It was as much her fault as mine."

"At least it was partly your fault. Dear man! I know that if I were to take you by the throat and strangle you as you sit there, I should be rendering society a service. I don't know why I hesitate, but I do. There ought to be a knacker's yard for such men as you. I assure you of this: that it would need very little provocation to induce me to make your wife a widow, and once more a happy woman. So bear that carefully in mind, especially as we are nearing Sutton station.

"But it may mean ruin if I don't keep my appointment."

Out went Otway's hand. Once more his fingers fastened on the speaker's throat, Harvey not making even the faintest show of resistance.

"Then let it mean ruin to you; who cares? Not I. You keep silence till we are clear of Sutton station and your eyes fixed steadily on me. If you so much as turn your face towards the platform, or move a finger, I'll kill you before any one can come to your help. You know I can; and I will."

He released the wretch as the train slowed down at the platform. There was no need to use further persuasion. The man sat staring at him, in a sort of crumpled heap, as if he had been some half-paralysed, wholly panic-stricken, puffed-out rabbit, Otway regarding him, meantime, with an indulgent smile. The train stopped dead; passengers hurried to and fro; porters shouted the name of the station; carriage doors opened and shut; but those two sat there, eyeing each other in that very singular fashion, motionless; the one knowing that the other would possibly have given all he had to have dared to shout to the people on the platform; the other believing that the moment in which he opened his lips would be his last.

The guard had sounded his whistle, the train had begun to move, when the door of the compartment in which the two men were was opened, and, exactly as Harvey himself had done, a tardy passenger came hurrying in. This was a contingency for which—however undesirable, from his point of view, it might be—Otway had been throughout conscious that he would have to be ready. This, however, was to be

for him, a day of disagreeable surprises, and for what he was not prepared was the discovery that the new-comer was Mr Joseph Rochambeau. He had seen nothing of him either at Euston or Victoria, although he had looked for him, as he imagined, in all directions. Was it possible, in spite of that, that he had been at his heels all the time. The mere possibility conveyed an inference that, as a spy, Mr Rochambeau was possessed of gifts of an unusual and uncomfortable kind.

As the door opened and shut Mr Harvey gave a start and one quick glance round, only instantly to return his eyes to the face in front of him. Otway, noticing the movement, extended his left hand, opening and shutting the fingers as he did so. Harvey shrivelled, if possible, into a smaller space than before.

Mr Rochambeau, on his part, seemed quite at his ease. Removing the dust coat, which he was still wearing, he folded it up carefully and placed it in the rack above his head. This compartment, by the way, in which the three men were travelling, was a lavatory carriage, the lavatory door being on the side which was towards the engine. On that side, therefore, there were only two seats, with the door between. Harvey was in one; Rochambeau had now deposited himself in the other. Otway faced them both. Having disposed of his coat Mr Rochambeau took off his cloth cap, and wiped his forehead with his pocket-handerchief. He seemed hot. Then he placed his cap with his coat. Settling his elbows on the two arms of his seat he turned his attention to Otway, who, up to that point, to all appearances, had ignored him completely. His voice betrayed a certain amount of irritation.

"So, Mr Lennard, I did not find you when I returned to the Exchange Hotel."

When he spoke, addressing Otway as Lennard, Mr Harvey started a second time, but became immediately conscious that the hand was being extended again. In contrast to Mr Rochambeau's, Mr Otway's tone was extremely agreeable.

"Ah, Mr Rochambeau! Have you had a pleasant journey? I did not gather that it was your intention to have travelled so far to-day."

"It was not; only you ran away, so I ran after you."

Mr Otway raised his eyebrows just a little.

"I beg your pardon? I don't quite follow."

"Why did you run away from Liverpool?"

"Run away? from Liverpool? My good sir! What do you mean?"

"Did I not tell you that I would return with my proofs to the hotel within an hour?"

"Well? what concern was that of mine? I mentioned to a person who seemed to be an acquaintance of yours that I would let you have an address to which you would communicate."

"You would let me have an address! I know! If I had once let you clear away I should never have seen you or heard of you again; never! never! I am not so simple."

"Then am I to understand that you have come all this way merely because I have?"

"Certainly; I have come after my father's fortune."

"Your father's fortune? Really, I don't know whether I ought to feel flattered or amused. By your father's fortune do you refer to the five-pound note which you professed to identify with one mentioned in the small volume which you were so good as to let me look at?"

"That is not the only one; not at all; there are others. You paid your bill at the hotel with two notes which were my father's. Your ticket at the railway station with another. It is as I guessed; you are in possession of the fortune that is of right mine."

"On my word, Mr Rochambeau, you march. This becomes really interesting. I begin to suspect you of being a character."

"You will find that I am not one to sit down and starve while another grows fat on what is indeed my own. That I am here to show you."

"Oh, you are to show me that, are you? I am extremely obliged. I trust that the demonstration may have the result which you appear to be taking a little for granted."

"You laugh at me? Good! We shall see. In affairs of this sort I am not a safe person to laugh at, Mr. Lennard."

George Otway was indulging in a smile, as if he was enjoying a capital joke, but all the time he kept a watchful eye on his friend in the opposite corner, noting that not only was he taking a lively interest in the new phase of the situation, but also that he had drawn himself up straighter, as if to place himself in a position not to lose a word that was being said.

"Aren't you a trifle uncomfortable there, Mr Harvey?

Don't you think it might rest you more if you were to lean a a little more back?"

Out went his left hand, and Mr Harvey returned to his crumpled-up posture. Rochambeau observed the little scene.

"This is a friend of yours? I did not know. But it does not matter. I will say in his presence what I have to say.

"Certainly; do not let this gentleman's presence prevent your saying anything you may have to say. Under the circumstances that would be a pity."

"What I have to say then is this: I am here to ask you to return to me my father's fortune, at once, without any excuses; without any, what you call, shuffling."

"That, at any rate, is frank. And what, Mr Rochambeau, do you call your father's fortune?"

"It consists of bank-notes—I have their numbers and description here," he tapped the breast-pocket of his jacket, "English, American, South American, Spanish, French, to the value of ten thousand, eight hundred and sixty pounds."

As a matter of fact, Mr Otway had satisfied himself that the sum mentioned was, approximately, the value of the contents of Ebenezer Pullen's metal box. He wondered how the ingenious Italian—he was becoming more and more convinced that Mr Rochambeau was, first of all, ingenious—had learned as much.

"And you say that these bank-notes were once the property of your father who kept a restaurant—where?"

"In London, in Dean Street, Soho."

"And how came your father—the proprietor of a restaurant in such a poverty-stricken part of London as that was then, to be in possession of such a polyglot collection of bank-notes?"

"My father's customers were what you call foreigners; they paid him in moneys of all the countries of the world. But that is not the question. I have here the numbers and description of the notes in my father's own writing."

"In your father's own writing?"

"Certainly; in my father's own writing."

"Have you already forgotten, Mr Rochambeau, that you told me that your father could hardly read or write?"

Mr Rochambeau seemed to be a trifle nonplussed, an accident which he endeavoured to carry off with an air.

"He could write well enough for that."

"Indeed; could he? The writing in the book you showed me struck me as being that of an educated man, and distinctly an Englishman's."

"You wish, then, to say that I do not know my own father's writing, and so to rob me of what is my own?"

"Not at all. I do not wish to rob you of anything. I only want you to show that there is anything of which you could be robbed. By the way, the proofs you went in search of: I presume you have them on you now."

"I have not. After I leave you I remember they were in the keeping of a friend who lives in London. But I will be open with you, Mr Lennard; that is what I wish, to hide nothing. I understand, alas! quite well that it will not be easy to prove, to the satisfaction of the lawyers, that the fortune was my father's and is now mine; it all happened so long ago. Besides, I am a poor man; I have no money for the lawyers; I cannot afford to wait for the long processes of the law. It is as an honourable man that I appeal to you; you know that the circumstances under which you came into possession of the fortune were peculiar."

"What do you suppose those circumstances were, Mr Rochambeau?"

"Ah, how can I tell! exactly, how can I say! But I am sure—and you know that it is true—that you did not come by it in an ordinary way. I invite you, you, yourself! to declare openly, candidly, truly, how it came into your hands."

"All the burden of proof, Mr Rochambeau, lies with you. I should prefer to say nothing until I have heard you to a finish."

"Good! I will finish then! Let us come to terms, Mr Lennard, as two friends, and that for the reasons I have stated. Give me half the fortune, that is, give me £5,000, now, at once, and you can keep the rest. I will give you acquittance for the whole."

"Yours is a generous offer, Mr Rochambeau."

"Ah, I do not wish to be ungenerous! not at all! that is not my character."

"At the same time I could not consent to deprive you of a single penny which I had reason to believe was yours. But I would remind you that, so far, you have given me no proof that there is even so much as a grain of truth in the story you have been telling."

"There is the book!"

"Precisely; there is the book. And about that I am disposed to think there hangs an eventful history. Would you mind my examining it? I will use it with every care, and return it to you immediately uninjured."

"But willingly! I will entrust it to you with entire confidence. Here is this gentleman to see that everything is fair!"

What Mr Rochambeau meant was not quite plain; but if he was relying on Mr Harvey for anything, his own intuition should have told him that he was leaning on a broken reed. Producing the ancient account-book of the morning he handed it to Mr Otway with something of a flourish. As he did so a scrap of paper dropped out of it on to the floor, apparently unnoticed by him. With a sudden instinct Otway covered it with his foot, proceeding to examine the volume which had been committed to his charge.

At an early stage of its existence it had probably cost a penny. It was a common memorandum-book, ruled with cash columns, and had a paper cover which had once been red. In substance it seemed to be a methodical and well-arranged register of the number of certain bank-notes, which could scarcely have been compiled by an uneducated man.

"The first leaf is missing."

"I think that the first leaf is not there."

"I'm sure it isn't. Moreover, it has been torn out recently."

"The book has been in that condition since I had it."

"Then you haven't had it long. A leaf has been torn out certainly within the last few weeks, which is unfortunate, because it may have contained matter which proved something. What is left proves nothing. Brown may learn, by some means, what are the numbers of certain notes which are the property of Jones, or he may become possessed of a list of them. But they do not, therefore, cease to belong to Jones. Thank you, Mr Rochambeau for letting me have a peep at your little book. I should like to learn its history; but I am convinced that you are mistaken in supposing that the entries it contains are in your father's hand."

As he returned Mr Rochambeau his penny account-book Otway stooped to pick up the scrap of paper which was beneath his foot. As he did so Mr Harvey sprang up in his seat with a cry:

"Let me ask you, for God's sake——"

He got so far, but no further, because by then Otway had returned to an erect position, whereupon he dropped back into a speechless, crumpled heap. Mr Otway regarded him with inquiring glances.

"Well, Mr Harvey, what were you about to ask?"

Mr Harvey began to stutter.

"I—I was going to ask that gentleman to—to close his window; there's—there's a draught.

"Were you? The idea is not a bad one. Perhaps, Mr Rochambeau, you would not mind closing your window. There is a slight current of air; and, also, as we are approaching Horsham, the closed window may render us more secure from interruption."

Mr Rochambeau closed his window, and the train slowed down into Horsham Station, where it remained some minutes. During the whole time, as if by some common tacit understanding, neither of the three men spoke a word; but so soon as they were off Mr Rochambeau began again.

"Well, Mr Lennard, what do you say to the offer which you yourself admit is a generous one?"

Mr Otway was studying the paper which he had picked up from the floor.

"I say that I rather fancy that the key to the situation lies in this paper which you dropped. It seems to be a portion of a chart of the Carribean Sea, and shows a small island with which I am acquainted, and, I think, you also. I don't know by what name you know it; it is known to me as the Island of the Gate of Hell. It was there you found the list of bank-notes which you call your father's, and which, at that time, contained a statement, signed by Ebenezer Pullen, to the effect that it, in reality, referred to certain notes which were to be found elsewhere upon the island, but which you, in spite of all your efforts, failed to light upon. How long ago is it since you were on that island, Mr Rochambeau?"

"You——"

"Steady! guard your language, sir."

"You think yourself very sharp, eh? You think yourself clever!"

"It is not so much that I think myself sharp or clever as that I am strongly of opinion that you are more impudent than either."

"You will give me my share! Do not imagine that I am to be cheated. You will give me my share!"

"Your share? Undoubtedly—you have it already."

"What have I got? I have got nothing! Not one dollar!"

"Precisely; that is your share."

"You make a joke of me? You are wrong; you will find that I am no joke. In that place was more than £10,000. You found it? Good. Yours is the lion's share. But I nearly found it also. I am entitled to something—and I will have it! You will give me £1000, or—you will be sorry!"

"Then you admit that you have been making an attempt at robbery; that your father's fortune was but a figure of speech for what never had anything to do with either you or your father. The admission does you credit, but—I am afraid that I shall have to be sorry."

"Then you will give me nothing? Think before you speak!"

"It is unnecessary for me to think: I will give you nothing."

There came a sudden outburst of speech from the crumpled figure in the corner.

"I will speak! You may kill me, but I will speak!"

The effect which might have been produced by Mr Harvey's sudden show of valour was considerably spoilt by the fact that he cowered still farther back into his corner, putting up his arm to shield his head, as some cowardly lad might do who seeks to ward off his comrade's onslaught. Mr Otway only laughed.

"That's right, speak up. Don't be afraid, say all that you have to say; you have my entire permission, which I accord the more willingly since I am convinced that, at last, you find yourself in the presence of a kindred soul."

Thus encouraged, Mr Harvey lowered his arm and sat a little straighter, making a quite gallant effort to gain something of his former bluster.

"This man, who calls himself Lennard to you, and Scott to me, is, in reality, Jacob Gunston, the Vauxhall Junction murderer."

Rochambeau regarded the speaker with something in his attitude which was suggestive of a terrier about to spring on a rat.

"What's that?"

"He's the man who killed the girl in the train; and because I wanted to give him into custody he nearly killed me just before you got into the carriage. There's a reward of £100 for him."

The Italian's lips parted in a fashion which again recalled the terrier.

"So! I remember reading about Jacob Gunston, very well indeed. And this is Jacob Gunston? That's nice for him. Well, Mr Gunston, what about that £1000, now?"

"What about it, Mr Rochambeau?"

"You give it to me you leave the train a free man. Otherwise——" He made some odd movements with his hands. "You know how they fasten the rope about the neck? I have seen it; it is not pretty."

"I will leave the train a free man, and you will not have a farthing, Mr Rochambeau. Your present tone puts an end to any doubt on that point which may have been existing in my mind."

"How do you make it out you will leave the train a free man? How do you make it out? There are two of us; you cannot kill us both."

"Can't I?"

"You will be a wise man not to try."

Apparently the experienced Mr Harvey had seen something in George Otway's face which filled his soul with sudden doubt. He broke into a warning cry.

"Look out! Pull the alarm! pull the alarm!"

Possibly Mr Rochambeau himself perceived the danger signal, for he endeavoured to act upon the warning. But it already was too late. As he sprang towards the knob, which was just over Otway's head to the left, that gentleman rose also. He struck the Italian with his clenched fist on the point of the chin a blow which seemed to lift him clean off his feet, and which hurled him backwards, so that he fell in a senseless heap on to the floor of the carriage. And where he fell he lay—still.

Then Mr Otway turned his attention to the gallant Harvey, who, at sight of what had happened to his hoped-for colleague, broke into hysteric cries.

"Don't kill me! don't kill me!"

"I shall kill you if you make that noise. I sha'n't if you are silent." And Mr Harvey was silent. "Take off your clothes!"

The fat man gasped.

"Take off your clothes, and be quick about it."

He took off his clothes. There was that, just then, in the other's face and manner which would have induced him to do, without remonstrance, or a show of it, anything that he was ordered to do. He removed his garments with a celerity which, considering the limited space and his dimensions, was surprising. When he had stripped himself to his shirt, without any hint of his intention, George Otway took him by the throat, and thrust his own socks into his mouth, so that they served as an efficient gag. He pinioned his legs with his leather braces and fastened his hands behind him with his handkerchief, so that he was as helpless as a trussed fowl. In that condition he bundled him into the lavatory compartment. He served the still unconscious Italian in the same fashion, thrusting him in after Mr Harvey. Just as he had finished his work, and had shut the lavatory door so that there was nothing to show what was hidden behind it, the train steamed into Dullington Station.

He descended to the platform with his bag in his hand, and closed the carriage door behind him. He strolled slowly out of the station, leaving his bag in the stationmaster's care, and on reaching the village street paused for a moment to watch the train start again upon its onward journey. As he strode along, swinging his cane, such of the country folk as he encountered wondered what the stalwart stranger might be laughing at. Something seemed to be amusing him hugely.

CHAPTER XV

ELSIE'S BROTHER

IN the dining-room at Dullington vicarage the vicar's wife stood talking to her son. Suddenly she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Hush! Someone's coming!"

The two stood listening, in her strained attitude, on her frightened face, an agony of attention. The expression on his features suggested something which was worse than fear —the fury of a desperate man. There was a sound of footsteps crunching the gravel path.

"Who is it?" she whispered.

His tone, as he replied, was grim.

"I know who it isn't; it isn't—them."

"How do you know? how can you tell?"

"My dear mother, if you were in my position—which the saints forbid you ever may be—you'd know, even though you were unable to say exactly how."

"Whoever it is is coming this way; what shall you do?"

"Just step behind this curtain; don't keep them, whoever it is. In this light nothing will be seen."

He moved behind the heavy stuff curtain which was draped at one side of the window. Without, the last rays of the departed sun still lighted the sky; within the room all was shadow. Scarcely had he disappeared than a voice came through the open window:

"Excuse me, but is there anyone inside there? I appear to have taken the wrong path and to have come round to the side of the house instead of to the front."

Silence within. The mother seemed to hear her own heart beating. Her limbs trembled; she closed her eyes, as if to shut out something which she feared to see. A scarcely audible murmur came from behind the curtain.

"Answer!"

And she answered.

"Who is it?"

"I beg your pardon, but is this Dullington vicarage?"

"It is. Who are you? what do you want? The entrance to the house is on the other side."

"So I now perceive. But the dim light's bewildering, and the garden is such a large one that I appear to have lost my way. Is Mr Thornton, or Mrs Thornton, at home?"

"I am Mrs Thornton."

"And I am George Otway."

There appeared in the frame of the open window, outlined against the faintly glowing sky, a big man, who carried his hat in his hand.

"George Otway? I seem to know the name."

"I have called to see you with reference to your daughter—Miss Elsie Thornton."

"Surely—you are the man who ran away with her!"

"Who ran away with her?"

The surprise the speaker felt was mirrored in his voice. The woman's tremulous tones betrayed her agitation.

"I know all about you, sir; you do not come and find me ignorant. I know that a man who called himself George Otway induced my child to leave the *Queen of the Seas* in a boat alone with him at dead of night. Where is my daughter now? Have you brought her home to her mother, sir?"

"You are under some singular misapprehension."

"I think not. I have the whole wretched story in Mrs D'Agostino's own hand—the lady with whom my child went as her companion. She has written and told me all."

"In my turn, Mrs Thornton, I think not. It is true that Miss Thornton and I were alone together in a little boat on the open sea, but the position was chosen by neither of us."

"I do not understand. I am afraid I must be a very wicked woman, because God seems to have marked me out for so many afflictions. I only know that you have taken my daughter from me, sir, and that I want her back again. Where is she?"

"I saw her last night in a house at Liverpool, and it is because I saw her there that I am here to-night."

"You saw her in a house at Liverpool? What do you mean?"

"At the risk of occasioning you more pain, Mrs Thornton, I feel that I had better be candid. I fear that Miss Thornton

has suffered either from a shock or from some form of illness, which, for the moment, has robbed her of the complete use of her faculties."

"Robbed her of the complete use of her faculties? What do you mean?"

He told her, as briefly and as plainly as he could, exactly what he did mean, narrating the story of his adventure in the house at Sefton Park with as much clearness as he could. She interrupted him from time to time with eager, anxious questions. When he had finished her whole heart seemed in her words.

"Is what you have told me true?"

"Madam, it is the absolute truth."

She examined his face as thoroughly as the dim light permitted, seeming to find on it something which lent her a measure of reassurance.

"Can I believe you? Oh, if I were only sure that I could trust and believe you."

The answer came from an unexpected quarter.

"I think, mother, that you may at least believe this gentleman."

There stepped out from behind the curtain a figure which was enveloped in what looked like a long black waterproof. George Otway regarded him with something which was very much like angry surprise.

"I did not know that we were honoured by the presence of a listener."

The newcomer was not slow to detect the touch of irritation with which the other spoke. In his reply there was a little touch of hauteur, as if he felt that his words were sufficient justification for anything which he might do.

"I am Frank Thornton—Elsie Thornton's brother."

"I am glad to have the honour of meeting you, Mr Thornton; still, may I ask why you have delayed making yourself known to me in so unusual a fashion?"

Frank Thornton hesitated for a moment, as if doubtful what form his answer should take. His mother went closer to him, touching him furtively with the tips of her fingers on the arm. In both her voice and her manner there seemed to be a spasm of fear.

"Frank, I—I will take this—this gentleman into the other room."

"Don't distress yourself with shadows, mother. There are realities enough without them. I fancy Mr Otway may not be altogether the sort of person you have supposed."

His manner, though quiet and self-possessed enough, seemed to do little towards calming his mother's agitation. Her voice was, if anything, more tremulous than before.

"No risks, my son, no risks! For God's sake, no risks!"

"Hush, mother. You conjure up fears which may exist only in your own imagination. Believe me, I will take no more risks than I can help, where there are nothing else but risks. It is essential that you and I should know if what this gentleman says is true: if we may trust him. It seems to me that there is no better way of making sure of that than this."

"Frank!"

Her voice rose in a wail of supplication, as if she besought him not to do the thing which he was about to do, but she was too late. Already, before her cry was uttered, he had put his hand up to his throat, and, loosing the voluminous garment which covered him, let it drop to the floor; even in the dim light it was made plain that he was attired in the ill-cut, badly-fitting, hideous garb which felons wear. He had not the knickerbockers and grey stockings of the convict, but the brick-dust-coloured trousers, liberally ornamented with broad arrows, which mark the convicted criminal sentenced, not to "penal servitude," but to "hard labour." The revelation was followed by silence for, perhaps, ten seconds, during which George Otway had time to digest the fact thus suddenly disclosed to him and to grasp at least something of what it must mean.

Thornton was the first to break the stillness. In his voice there was no hint of shame, but rather a suggestion of pride and rage and scorn. It needed but an elementary judge of character to perceive that his ostentatious air of icy coldness only served as a cover to the flaming fiery furnace which raged within.

"You see? I am a felon escaped from jail—and Elsie Thornton's brother. You make the acquaintance of her family under somewhat singular circumstances. Now you understand why, when I became conscious that someone was approaching, I considered it advisable to conceal myself behind the curtain, Mr Otway."

George Otway was still. Although used to being taken unawares, the surprise, in this case, was so complete, so sudden, and of a nature so entirely unexpected, that even his nimble wits refused to take in, on the instant, all the potentialities of the position. He had associated Elsie Thornton with nothing but innocence, purity, sweetness, truth, honour. The idea of having to connect her with a brother who was a convicted felon required a change in his point of view which even he could not bring about without an effort. Besides, there was something in this brother's bearing which was so different to what one expects to find in a hardened criminal that he wanted, before committing himself in any way, to have some faint notion of what kind of man this really was with whom he had to deal.

So it happened that the two men tried, in silence, to make out as much as they could of each other in the rapidly darkening room, while the mother held her peace. It was the man in the uniform of shame who was the first to speak.

"You appear to have been falsely accused, Mr Otway. I also have suffered from the same thing. The charge against you was as serious as could easily be made against a man, but you have still an opportunity to disprove your guilt. For me that opportunity is still to seek; it is because I am seeking for it that you see me here. I have heard the story which you have told my mother, and am disposed to think, judging by the ear alone, that it has the ring of truth. I should like to have a chance of calling in my eyes as judges. Mother, do you think that we could have a lamp, so that Mr Otway and I could see each other better?"

In the woman's voice was the old anxiety.

"Are you sure, my boy, that it is wise?"

"I am sure, mother, that it would be unwise to run a risk of Mr Otway and I remaining acquaintances only of the darkness."

"Let me close the window and draw the curtains, and then you shall have a lamp."

When the lighted lamp was placed upon the table George Otway saw what manner of persons these were with whom he had been brought into such curious contact.

Mrs Thornton was a little woman, whose chestnut hair —Elsie's hair—was lighted here and there with grey. Her

features were small and dainty, she still was pretty, but they were pinched and worn. Hers was the face of a woman who had known much trouble.

Her son was as large as she was little. Even the hideous costume which he wore could not conceal the fact that he was shaped after a good model, and that he bore himself as a man should do. The close-cropped black hair brought his fine head into clearer outline. Otway was surprised to learn how young he was. He had the clean, healthy look of a well-living youth of three or four-and-twenty. It was a handsome face, and a strong one, full of character. There was resolution in the square jaw; promise in the fine-cut, aquiline nose; an attractive quality in the eyes. They were wide apart, set well back in the head, large and open-lidded. One doubted if, in colour, they were violet or dark blue. But they were fearless, unshrinking eyes, which looked at the world steadily and sanely. In them, at the moment, was a stern show of pride, which amounted almost to defiance; yet one felt that they could be lighted with a radiance of laughter in front of which the sourest temper would have to sweeten.

Having looked this young man carefully up and down, as a connoisseur might inspect a curio on which he has to deliver judgment, George Otway arrived at a verdict on at least two points: the one, that, so far as looks were concerned, this was just the person he would have chosen to be Elsie's brother; the other, that anyone who seemed less like the sort of matèrial out of which a jail-bird is fashioned he had never yet encountered. If this man had been condemned to prison by a level-headed jury, then it was for doing something for which no person would have need to be ashamed; or, in giving him to the world as an example of her handicraft, Nature had either by mistake used the wrong mould, or — told a lie; for even Dame Nature has no right to scrawl Honour and Honesty large all over a man if those are qualities which he does not possess.

Not the least odd part of the business was that each man seemed to arrive at something like the same decision as regards the other. Presently the young man turned to Mrs Thornton, saying:

"Mother, I think you may believe Mr Otway." Then to that gentleman himself he said: "So, in Liverpool, last night,

you saw my sister in a position which suggests that she is in want of help."

"Indeed I am almost afraid to think how much she may be in want of help."

"Unconsciously, Mr Otway, you are making my position more than I can bear." Involuntarily the young man closed his eyes, as if seeking to shut out something of horror which it was beyond his strength to look at. "As I have told you, I am here because I seek for a chance to show that I am not the creature which this uniform makes me appear. That I can do it I know, if I can only have a little time and a little opportunity. But, for me, these are the two hardest things to get in all the world: time and opportunity; as you may guess, and, if Elsie's in the plight you speak of, my first duty is to her. How can I let the precious moments slip by without rendering her the aid of which she is standing in such pressing need? Yet, if I turn to help her, before I can be of any real assistance the small modicum of time and opportunity which I have risked so much to gain will have slipped away, and they will have me back again in the place from which I've lately come. That will mean an end of all hope both for Elsie and for me. So, Mr Otway, you perceive the dilemma in which I am."

"Before we proceed any further, you and I, I should like to put to you a question, Mr Thornton, which I hope you will not resent. If you are the kind of man I take you for, you won't. You have lately been an inmate of one of His Majesty's jails?"

"I have; so lately as this morning."

"Are you innocent of the offence for which you have been sent there?"

"I am; as innocent as you are."

"I knew it. But the key-stone of my character's the business instinct, and I like to have everything, in matters of the least importance, set down clearly in black and white. Will you give me your hand, Mr Thornton? I shall be very glad to give you mine."

CHAPTER XVI

ESCAPED

AS they exchanged grips the young man laughed, on which Otway laughed too, saying, as he did so:

"Thornton, you're the sort of man I've been looking for for some time—the right sort—the sort who, when a villainous fate and a scurvy fortune give him least cause for laughter, laughs still, and with a gay heart. That's the sort of man who wins the battle of life in the end. Apart from the fact that, for her sake, it would give me pleasure to meet even a thirteenth cousin of your sister's, I'm glad to meet you on your own account. Now tell me—with all due apologies to Mrs Thornton—how the deuce comes it that you find yourself in this galley?"

"Do you mean just where I am?" Otway nodded. "Well, I've run away."

"I take it that you've run away. I'm not wanting you to tell me that, being capable of guessing that you're not about in that suit of clothes just for the benefit of your health. But I've always rather taken it for granted that His Majesty's jails are not easy places to get away from; at any rate, to any great extent."

Frank Thornton laughed again, shortly, dryly.

"You're right; they're not. It's like this with me. Not yet a fortnight ago I was found guilty of embezzlement—robbing my employers. Although the offence was a first one"—this with another grin—"the case was a bad one, so that the judge, in his great wisdom, thought it well to mark his sense of the enormity of my guilt by sentencing me to two years' hard labour."

"Did he? And where's the man who did it?"

"I know. It is to get within reach of him that I've run away. When I do, I don't think it will be long before I succeed in persuading him that it might be advisable for him to tell the truth."

This was spoken with a grimness which was eloquent Otway smiled.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you turn out to be right, if you find him in a proper mood and a convenient place."

"That's it; it's a question of time and opportunity, both of which things are likely to be most to seek."

"I suppose they're after you?"

"I suppose they are—hot foot, especially after the fashion in which I gave them the slip."

"How did you do it?"

"In a tunnel."

"In a tunnel? I wasn't aware that prisons had tunnels."

"They haven't. I wasn't in a prison at the time. I'll explain. After my sentence they sent me to Wandsworth jail. There a warder came to me and informed me that I was to be transported to another prison. He didn't condescend to inform me why or where; and it was only when I found myself at Clapham Junction in company with a dozen other gentlemen in the same position that it dawned on me that we were bound for Lewes. Now I live here; Lewes jail is over there"—he pointed with his hand—"not so very many miles off. On the way to it we should have to pass through country almost every yard of which I knew. I should not be very far from friends—the kind of friends who never fail."

He put his arm about his mother's waist and drew her closer to his side. It was odd to see how diminutive she was in comparison with him.

"There rose in my mind the glimmer of a thought that if I could escape from my custodians, if only for a little while, I might get within reach of a harbour of refuge from which it might be difficult for them to win me back. Before they could do it I might have brought the man, who had chosen to let me occupy the place which he ought to have filled, to a state of mind in which he would make it clear to all the world that they had no right to me at all. So that freedom for an hour or two might mean my restoration to that place among honourable men out of which I had been juggled."

He stopped for a second to kiss his mother and to smooth her hair with his hand.

"As I said, it was but a glimmer of a thought. In the brains of the best-conducted prisoners such embryos are born

at times. I never dreamed that a chance of escape would offer. I had imagined that convicted prisoners, passing from jail to jail, would be kept in such rigid safe-keeping that a chance of slipping away could never, by any possibility, occur. And to do my custodians justice, they did their duty well, never relaxing watch or ward. If it were not owing to two little accidents which would not be likely to recur, I suppose, once in a million times, they would have delivered me, in due course, at the address to which I was consigned.

"The first accident occurred nearly at the start. It consisted in the fact that the guard of the train by which we journeyed happened to be a man whom I have known for many years. He used to live in our village, and began his railway career at the local station. It chanced that my father was able to render him one or two services, and he is a man with a memory. As we were being marched to the compartment which had been reserved for our accommodation I saw him standing by the open door. He saw me too. Although he made not the slightest sign of recognition, I knew, all at once, that I had for friend a man in authority, whose heart was not only in the proper place, but whose head, also, was screwed on in the right way. When we were in he was supposed to shut the door and lock it. But I knew—although still he gave no sign—that the locking had been but a feint.

"That guard was accident No. 1. It was when the train was stopping at Croydon that I came on accident No. 2. I discovered that the handcuff by means of which I was, as it were, riveted to another prisoner—a drink-sodden Billingsgate porter, who was doing six months for kicking his wife to a jelly—had something the matter with its constitution, which had prevented it from properly snapping, so that I had but to give my wrist a sharp twist to be freed from it. My companion recognised the position at the same instant I did, but, with admirable sagacity, he betrayed no hint of it. Possibly the same idea was taking root in his mind which had already germinated in mine.

"With me it was beginning to take tangible shape, and that shape was—Balcombe Tunnel. The words—Balcombe Tunnel—were commencing to occupy my brain to the exclusion of all else. Balcombe Tunnel is about the nearest point to Dullington. I knew every foot of the country which lies between.

My companion and I were facing the engine. A warder was on my left. Beyond him was the door, which, although it was supposed to be locked, had the window up. That closed window not only made the atmosphere in our compartment bear a family resemblance to that of the Black Hole of Calcutta—you will understand that we were eight prisoners and four warders: the other four prisoners were with three warders in the compartment behind us—but it promised to put the little excursion I was contemplating beyond my capacity. I should not only have to pass the warder at my side, but get that window down, and turn the handle of that door. It seemed to me that it would be impossible for me to perform those three operations before the official eye; and so, I believe, it would have proved if it had not been for a trifle for which I have a slight suspicion that I was indebted to accident No. 1—in other words, to my friend the guard of the train.

"How he managed it I can only surmise; but if he was not responsible I can only say that, by a very extraordinary coincidence indeed, the light went out as we entered Balcombe Tunnel. Suddenly, and without the slightest warning in the way of a premonitory flicker, just as we got well out of the daylight, the gas overhead disappeared, and we were plunged into utter darkness. There ensued, in the pitch blackness, a hubbub and confusion which I will not attempt to describe. My companions were the sort of people to make the most—from their point of view—of so unexpected an occurrence. Shielded from the warders' vision, it did not matter what they did; and they did it. Quite what happened I cannot tell you. I can only say that within half-a-dozen seconds after the light had vanished I had wrenched myself free of the handcuff which attached me to my companion on the right, and that the carriage was full of noisy and scuffling men. I held my peace, keeping as still as the others would allow me to do, waiting and watching for my chance. The warder at my side kept trying to light a match. Every time a flame appeared some one put it out again.

"The train was travelling pretty fast. On our side was the tunnel wall. I knew that between us and it was a space which could be measured by inches rather than feet; that here and there were bays in the brickwork into which men working on the line could draw back to permit trains to pass them. If I

opened that carriage door the chances were that it would spring back from the wall. And, in any case, the prospect of having to leap out on to that narrow strip of space in the darkness, with the train going at that rate, was not a pleasant one to contemplate. Yet it would have to be that or nothing. I did think of making a dash for the alarm, stopping the train, and then springing out as it was slacking speed. But then, if I could alight from a motionless, or almost motionless, train, others could, and probably would, do so also. I should become the object of a hot pursuit. On the other hand, the persons who would jump in the darkness from a flying train were few and far between. I doubted if even the warders would not think twice before they tried it.

"So I resolved that I would wait until the train, as I judged, was at least half way through the tunnel, and then, while it was still moving at full speed, I'd try my luck.

"It is surprising that I managed to get out of the carriage at all, there was so much rough and tumble horseplay. More than once I was almost driven out of my seat. At last I was quite. Someone giving me a tremendous shove, pushed me forward so that I had to take refuge on the floor of the carriage on my hands and knees. As I put out my arm, to save myself, it came in contact with the warder's arm, who I immediately understood was holding the strap of the window to prevent its being lowered.

"Somehow that decided me. I dragged his wrist away, got the window down and the door open in a shorter space of time than, I should think, it was ever done before. Almost before I knew it myself I was standing on the footboard. Then someone made a grab at me; I felt his hand grazing my tightly-buttoned jacket. I realised that, while there was more room between the side of the tunnel and us than I had supposed, I was still higher above the ground than I had bargained for. An attempt to reach it with one swinging foot, and so alight as, for instance, one does from a moving omnibus, resulted in failure. My foot touched nothing but the empty air. Evidently I should just have to leap into the darkness and hope for the best.

"I leaped, and as I did so someone fired a revolver. Whether a warder had aimed at me, or whether he merely desired to sound an alarm, I cannot say, but I had no doubt whatever that the shot had come from one of them. It seemed

that I banged against the ground the instant I quitted the footboard; such a bang! It not only shook every bone in my body, but I felt persuaded that at least half of them must certainly be broken. The train went whirling past. I believe that the current of air it left behind did me good. By the time that I was on my feet, and satisfying myself that, so far as I could perceive, no bones of any consequence were shattered after all, the red light on the back carriage was already only a speck in the distance. The train had not been stopped; it was still whirling on.

"I was so shaken, so confused and stupid, that it was some seconds before I recollected what it was that I had now to do. Then I began to stumble awkwardly towards the Three Bridges end of the tunnel. By degrees, as my head got clearer and my limbs more under my own control, I quickened my pace, until presently I was making as much speed as, under the circumstances, was possible towards freedom and the light, my object being to get to the end of the tunnel before the train could make Balcombe station and word could be sent to the man in the signal-box which, I knew, was within, perhaps, two hundred yards of the other end, to keep a sharp look-out for my appearance.

"Balcombe Tunnel is the second longest tunnel on the Brighton line, and it's apt to be damp. I discovered that, then, if I had not been aware of it before. To travel, in darkness which could be cut with a knife, perhaps six hundred yards over slippery, uneven, unseen ground, with a mysterious something—which felt like liquid grease—dropping on you as you go, is an experience of a singular kind. I kept to the wall on my right as closely as I could, being aware that no other train would be likely to come that side for, at any rate, some little time, and that I should be able to see it coming if one did. Yet it was not easy to keep close; it was horribly wet and slimy, and my feet kept getting caught in what I suppose were telegraph wires, and every now and then the wall would vanish from under my finger-tips, which took me quite aback, and worried me, until I became to understand that it was because I had reached a bay.

"Once I had a fright in spite of myself. I heard a train approaching from behind; and though my common-sense told me that it must be on the other line, and therefore at a safe distance from where I was, the roar it made filled the

whole dreadful place to such an indescribable extent that I felt there could be no room there for it and me, and that it was advancing like an avenging monster to compass my destruction. I fought against the feeling at first; but as it came nearer and nearer, and the roar grew more and more, my reason gave way to panic fear, and I crouched against the sticky, foul-smelling wall, like some shivering cur, trembling as with the expectation that each moment might be my last. As the train went rushing past I am not sure that I did not actually cry out. It had gone, and was out of sight, before I understood that I was really safe, and then I was shaking so that my legs refused to hold me straight.

"The train had left behind it suffocating smoke and vapour through which, after a while, I recommenced stumbling blindly on. How long it was before I perceived a pencil of light gleaming afar off I cannot say. As a matter of fact, I believe that the gleam was there some time before, in my stupidity, I understood what it meant. When I did understand I moved faster and faster, until at last I came out into the daylight at a run. I came out into the blazing sun, which I found so dazzling that, for still some further precious seconds, I stood blinking foolishly. Then I remembered the man in the signal-box, who, probably by now would be on the look-out for me.

"Fortunately the box itself was hidden by a bend. He would have to leave it to get a glimpse of me. I doubted if he would venture to do that. I began to scramble up the bank, which was covered with trees and bushes which were thick enough to afford me ample cover. So satisfied was I of this that I sat down in the middle of a clump of bushes to rest and to think things out. It was obvious that the first person to whom I showed myself would know at first sight that I was an escaped prisoner: I was a walking advertisement of the fact. It was broad day, and would be for hours yet. I could not afford to wait for the friendly mantle of the night. If I stayed where I was, waiting for it, long before it came I should have been recaptured. It was of capital importance that I should reach home at the earliest possible moment. So far as I could see I was engaged in a forlorn hope. Capture seemed inevitable. I had got as far as I had done by dint of sheer and unadulterated impudence. The only thing was to push my impudence—or imprudence, if you will—a step or two

farther until it reached a stage where, even aided by fortune, it was unavailing.

"I was aware that between the Brighton road—my objective—and Balcombe Tunnel was a lane, which was pretty enough, but, for me, impossible. It was a distance of perhaps two miles, and was bordered on either side by cottages, farms, lodges, gentlemen's seats. It would be easy enough to make my way to Dullington across country, but attired in the garb in which I was? The population thereabouts was scanty; but, even though that was so, such a conspicuous landmark as I should make would be detected before I had gone a hundred yards. The only means of avoiding an immediate utter fiasco would be by laying hands on some garment, or garments, which would enable me to conceal the uniform I had on.

"Recontinuing my assent I gained the top of the bank, to find myself brought up by a hedge which bounded a cottage garden. I had come on it so suddenly that I had no time to duck down before I realised that it was there, so that if there had been anyone in the garden, or even at the window, he or she would have spotted me at once. But the garden seemed deserted; it suddenly struck me as being possible that that was the case with the cottage too. It was a tiny, ancient, thatched building, consisting of, I suppose, at the most, two rooms. The windows were closed; there was no smoke rising from the single chimney; the place wore what seemed to me to be a deserted air. With me it was a case of neck or noth ing; I was between the devil and the deep sea. Situated as I was, the thing might be worth inquiring into. In less than no time I was over the hedge, in the garden, stealing across it into the house. I peered through the small latticed window, but could see no one within. Gaining the door I rapped with my knuckles. First softly; then, as no answer came, more loudly. As, still, there was no response, I turned the handle, opening the door an inch or two, and then walked in.

"The moment I had crossed the threshold I perceived that, after all, the place had an occupant; a woman sat in an easy chair, and looked at me. I was so taken by surprise, and, I fancy, so conscience-stricken, that I could only stand like a petrified idiot and gape. When I recovered myself my impulse was to back out again, and bolt. But, so soon as I moved, the woman spoke.

"'You need not run away; I know who you are.'

"At her words I stared still more. She had a curiously quiet voice, which I think one finds in people who speak but seldom. Her hair was white, and on her face was a peculiar pallor. As I continued to look it began to dawn on me that there was something singular in her attitude; it was so very rigid. Hers was an old grandfather's chair, whose cretonne covering had been patched so often that but little of the original material was left; and she sat right back in it, so straight and upright, that one perceived there must be some cause for the erectness of her position.

"'You know me?' I stammered. 'What do you mean?' Then, remembering, began again to back out. 'I—I beg your pardon; I did not know there was anyone here; you did not answer when I knocked.'

"She stayed me again.

"'Stop! Did I not tell you not to go? Did I not say I know you?'

"'But how can you know me? I do not recollect ever having seen you before.'

"'You are a prisoner escaped from Lewes gaol. My husband was a prisoner who escaped from Lewes gaol. That is how I know you." While I was silent, amazed at her manner of putting the thing, she continued, in the same odd, lifeless whisper: "They sent my husband to Lewes gaol for poaching. He had not done it; but they sent him, all the same. And while he was there he heard that I had a baby, so he escaped and came to me. And while he was holding the baby in his arms—it was a little tiny baby because of the trouble I was in when I had it—the men from the prison burst into the room and found him. They rushed at him so that the baby was thrown from his arms and fell on to the floor, and was killed, there, before my eyes, as I lay in bed. When he saw that they had killed my baby he fought with them as if he had gone stark mad, so that they nearly killed him too. And when they got him outside, in spite of the handcuffs and the way they had handled him, he broke away from them again, and ran down the slope on to the railway. As he got on to the line a train came out of the tunnel, and knocked him down and cut him into two, so that I lost my husband and my baby both in the same hour. I've never moved out of this room since then. And that's more than five-and-thirty years ago. I've always known that someone

else would come to me who had escaped from Lewes gaol. And now you've come. I hope that the men from the prison won't find you as they found him.'

"She told her story in her sepulchral whisper, in a dry, matter-of-fact sort of way which made me shiver. I fancied I could see the frenzied wretch—her husband—plunging down the bank which I had just now climbed, only to be dashed to pieces by the roaring monster as it came rushing out of the tunnel. It seemed quite on the cards that his fate might be mine. I said so.

"'I'm afraid that the men from the prison will quickly find me if I can't find some clothes to exchange for these which proclaim me for what I am.'

"She was silent, as if considering what I had said.

"'I've no men's clothes. You should have them if I had. I've only a man's hat; it's there on the peg. You can take it if you like.'

"On a peg was a battered straw hat. It was not much in the way of a disguise; but, still, it was at least something on account, and, perhaps, better than nothing. I had left my own cap behind me in the train. But it seemed that in offering me the hat she had not come to the end of her resources.

"'There's my sister's waterproof. I used to be six foot one as a lass, and to-day she's taller than ever I was. It'd cover you pretty well all over, and it's as fit for a man as for a woman. You can take that too. You're welcome to it for her; if she was in this room she'd tell you so with her own mouth. She's no fonder of the men from the prison than I am.'

"Well, I tried on the waterproof to which she referred; I was still wearing it when you appeared. Her sister must be a giantess, because, as she put it, it not only covered me pretty well all over, but it shrouded me entirely. Indeed, unless I held myself very straight, the skirts trailed in the dust, as a woman's might have done. She was also quite correct in stating that it was as suited to a man as to a woman. I am no judge of that kind of thing, but it seems that in the days of its youth it must have been meant for a masculine wearer. Anyhow, enveloped in the waterproof cloak, crowned with the battered straw hat, although I must have presented a somewhat incongruous spectacle in a country lane on a summer's day, at least the uniform beneath was hidden, and I doubt if I

looked a more remarkable object than some of the tramps who patronise our rural roads.

"I fancy that I didn't, because I marched for over three hours along the Handcross lane and across country here; and though the few people I passed stared as I went by, and perhaps some of them, when I had gone, paused to stare again, none of them seemed to notice anything strange enough about me to warrant them in making uncomfortable remarks or asking awkward questions.

"I arrived home safely, only to find—when I had gained my haven of refuge—that, by one of fate's little ironies, I had apparently done all that I had done in vain."

Frank Thornton ceased. As he did so he pressed his mother closer to his side. She, putting up her hands, drew his face down to hers and kissed him very tenderly.

"My boy!" she murmured. "My dear, dear boy!"

George Otway, before he spoke, regarded them, as they caressed each other, with a queer light in his eyes.

"I don't understand you when you say that you have apparently done it all in vain."

"Why, the thing is very simple, and—if it were not to me a question almost of life and death—not without its humorous side. Now that I have reached home it appears that the only masculine garments the house contains are my father's, who happens himself to be away, and as he is about my mother's height his clothes are not likely to be of much use to me. Since I cannot start out again into the night garbed like this, because, sooner or later, detection is bound to come—and if I stay here the probabilities are that my pursuers will be on the scene before the morning—you will yourself perceive that I don't seem likely to gain much by leaping out of that train in the tunnel."

"It is only a question of clothes?"

"Only! the mischief is that it's such a large only!"

"Not at all. It seems to be part of my destiny recently to change clothes with other people. I shall be delighted, my dear Thornton, to change clothes with you."

"To change clothes with me!"

As the two men stood staring at each other there was heard, echoing through the quiet house, the tinkling of a bell.

CHAPTER XVII

A TRANSFORMATION

AS the tinkling of the bell died away, Mrs Thornton said, half smiling as she observed the tense expression which was on the two men's faces:

"This time I don't fancy there's any need for apprehension. I think it's Lizzie, my small maid: it has been her evening out. So that we may have the house a little longer to ourselves I will invent an errand which will take her to the other side of the village."

As soon as the old lady had left the room George Otway turned to her son.

"Now, Thornton, I'll cut the Gordian knot, change clothes! That'll get you out of your tangle. I'll don His Majesty's uniform, for, after all, it is His Majesty's!" this with a whimsical look, "and you shall get into mine."

"But I don't understand, or, perhaps, I should rather say that I don't think you do. You don't realise that you'd be committing an offence, half-a-dozen for all I know. First, in aiding a felon to escape; and then, if you went masquerading round the country in this attire, I'm not sure they wouldn't charge you with stealing it, and all sorts of things. I'm convinced they'd find you guilty of a variety of dreadful crimes, so that you'd end by being in a worse plight than I am."

"My dear fellow, these things are trifles; it's you who don't understand. The point, as I take it, is this, if you have a day or two's law you'll be able to establish your innocence in the eyes of all the world, isn't that so?"

"I believe I shall be able to do so within a very few hours, if I'm only able to get within reach of the man I'm after."

"Just so! then I shall figure as a hero. People will say: 'Just see what this man did so that the truth might be brought to light—actually dressed himself in prison clothes! Wasn't it noble of him?' You catch the idea? I shall be

the recipient of the public applause, and I shall have had my adventure into the bargain. I give you my word that there are few things my soul loves like a well-spiced adventure."

"But——"

"'But me no buts!' The thing's settled! jump out of those clothes and into mine."

"But you must let me say a word."

"Not half a one! 'Do first, talk afterwards'; that's a motto worth your earnest attention. Seriously, the hunters are not likely to give the quarry a longer start than they can help; if you don't look alive it'll be your fault if I get into serious trouble. So upstairs and effect the transformation, and come! come! come!"

As, with his arm through Frank's, he was urging him towards the door, Mrs Thornton re-entered the room.

"Come?" she echoed. "Where?"

She stared at the pair in front of her, as if puzzled by the fact, that both of them seemed to be amused. It was Otway who answered.

"To this son of yours bedroom, Mrs Thornton. I suppose he has a bedroom. You must know that I'm in search of adventure, and he's going to put me in the way of as fine a one as the heart of man could wish for. He's going to lend me this elegant suit of his, so that I can pretend that it's me who preferred Balcombe Tunnel to Lewes gaol, and he's going off in those commonplace garments of mine, as a mere ordinary citizen, who has never heard of Balcombe Tunnel. Within four-and-twenty hours he'll have shown that he's another victim of blind injustice, and I shall be posing as something really almost heroic, don't you know."

The puzzlement was still on Mrs Thornton's trouble-worn countenance.

"But, Mr Otway, if you are in earnest——"

"If I am in earnest! Don't I look as if I were in earnest?"

"Then why should you do this thing—for us?"

"Have I not been telling your son that the passion of my life is a love of adventure? and must I tell you again?" He drew himself up straighter, with something new in his eyes and in his voice. "And then, won't you understand that I have met your daughter and would meet her again? and that I hold her in such esteem that I cannot stomach the

thought that she's a brother who's—you'll forgive me, Thornton—supposed to be a felon. If he can show that he's not—as he will do if he's a chance, and that soon—by giving him that chance I shall have made her happy, and shall esteem myself fortunate to have been able to render her so great a service. You see, Mrs Thornton, that is my point of view. It's a purely selfish one, tending in the end only to my own advantage; so if you'll encourage this young gentleman to lose no more time I shall be so much nearer the attainment of my wishes. Therefore, Frank Thornton, if you please, upstairs."

He held the door open with a flourish, and the pair passed through.

In a little bedroom, whose open window looked out on to a glory of Banksia roses—as they could tell by the perfume and by the accident that a single flowering spray trailed over the sill—the metamorphosis took place: to all outward seeming the honest man became a felon and the felon an honest man. It was all done, too, with such surprising swiftness. Somewhat to the younger man's bewilderment Otway kept laughing to himself all the time. He was thinking of that first exchange with Jacob Gunston, and of all the singular consequences which had ensued. Some similarity between that occasion and this, or perhaps, some contrast, seemed to tickle him consummately.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded Thornton, when, for the third time, the other broke into a series of chuckles.

"Thoughts, my dear Thornton, thoughts! I was thinking of what great consequences come from little causes, and of how much may result from a change of clothes. By the way, have you a razor?"

"I believe you'll find an old one in the wash-hand-stand drawer; I left one there, I know. What do you want a razor for? To cut your throat actually, instead of metaphorically, as, for all you can tell, you may be doing now?"

"Not exactly, sir—not exactly. I want a razor to enable me to remove my beard—for nothing more formidable than that."

"Remove your beard? Otway, you're not going to disfigure yourself because of a sudden freak like this!"

"I'm not so sure that the result will be disfigurement; and,

anyhow, it will grow again. Beards will grow, you know, even when they have been shaved. It's a principle of mine to do a thing thoroughly if I do it at all. I'm going to do this thing as thoroughly as it can be done, you can bet on that. Those pursuing friends of yours are going to be diddled as neatly as they ever have been diddled, or you can call me names. Those of them who are hottest on the trail will have your description, even though they may never have seen you in the flesh. If I've a beard, if I'm the hairy monster that I am by nature, they'll know at once that I'm not you. The clothes won't take them in. On the contrary, they'll perceive exactly what has taken place. And that won't suit my book at all. I want them to take me for you, not only at first, but right along."

"Take you for me! My dear Mr Otway, even with the best will in the world to commit suicide—and it seems you have it—even you can't work miracles."

"I'm not so sure. It depends on what you mean by miracles, so much lies in the meaning of a word. You see, beard, whiskers, and moustache are gone, with half-a-dozen strokes. Already, I'm not the man I was; indeed, I hardly know myself."

The alteration was singular. The fair, well-trimmed beard and moustache had vanished, and instead there was a smooth-faced man, with a square, strong chin, a well-shaped, laughing mouth, and rounded cheeks which were flushed with health.

"Why," exclaimed Thornton, "you look a dozen years younger.

Otway laughed.

"Thank you. Then it would appear that the disfigurement is not so serious as you had feared. You see, I'm coming back to you. The next point is, my hair's too long. I saw a pair of scissors somewhere. Ah, here they are upon this chest of drawers. They've done their day's work, but still they'll do another. If I plant myself upon this chair you can play barber?"

"Play barber? Do you mean, can I cut your hair?"

"Well, I don't know that that is quite the phrase, because I don't mean cut in any artistic sense; but can you reduce the hair which is on my head to the dimensions of the hair which still remains on yours? You see, mine's in the fashion of the world; yours is in—another fashion. I can't hack at it my-

self, but don't you think you could? I shouldn't fancy that it requires much skill."

"It doesn't. I imagine that the man who operated on me had never officiated as hairdresser before. If you want your hair to look like mine I don't doubt my capacity to make it."

"Good. Fall to! Don't clip pieces off my ears, and make as few incisions in my skin as possible. That's all I ask."

"Then you ask more than I was able to. The man who handled me used his scissors on more than my hair. He made such a sight of me, indeed, that when I showed myself to the warder that officer declined to allow him to handle anybody else. So I believe that I am the first and last example of his tonsorial powers."

"Steady! that's my flesh; I should say you've nipped off about an inch or so."

"I beg your pardon. I'm very sorry, I'm sure." Thornton paused to regard his work, so far as it had gone. "I'm afraid I'm making an awful hash of it."

"I'm afraid you are. It's what I hoped for. Go on. See the thing well through. The result will be quite up to the official standard."

"Otway, why are you making a spectacle of yourself like this, to speak of nothing else? I can't conceive why you should do it for me."

"I'm not doing it for you; put that idea behind you. I'm doing it for your sister. I will be frank. I don't see you in the matter at all; I only see her."

Thornton was contemplatively tapping the comb and the scissors together.

"It must feel odd to feel like that about a woman."

"It does. I hope, for your own sake, that you'll feel like that when your turn comes. It's one of the few feelings which are worth having."

"What makes it odder is that it should be for Elsie. If it had been for another girl—— I know a girl——"

"Do you?"

"Yes; I do. Now, for her——! But, for Elsie, somehow, it's different, and that makes it so funny. Of course, she's a trump and all that, but—well, you see, she's my sister."

"That's just what I do see. What I don't see is why you're not going on with this hair-mowing job of yours. Now, as close as you please, but don't dig your shears into the soil."

Soon Thornton announced that his task was concluded.

"What do you think of that?"

"Nothing; or, rather, I think so much I'd rather not say what I do think." Otway was contemplating himself in the mirror. "I tell you what it is, Thornton, if we weren't in the position we are in, I should ask you to step outside and explain what you mean by it. If you couldn't manage your fists any better than you do a pair of scissors you'd have trouble."

"You made me do it. I knew I should make a botch of the thing."

"You knew right. It'd be a fair exchange for me now to have a cut at you, but the mischief is you've nothing left to cut at. I couldn't jab at your ears with cold-blooded intention."

"I only just touched one of yours."

"That's all, with an accent on the just. You might have treated them both alike; it shows a kind of partiality which the one just touched resents. What's in this bottle?"

"Permanganate of potash. Otway! be careful! don't let it touch your hands, it will stain them if you do!"

"It will if it's of decent quality and the virtue's not all gone out of it."

Otway was pouring some of the contents of a bottle, which he had taken off the mantelshelf, into the palm of his hand, which he had shaped like a cup. Thornton was observing his proceedings with some show of perturbation.

"Otway! don't be an ass! don't play any tricks! What are you up to? It will dye your hair!"

"That's what I'm anticipating, if well rubbed into the roots. You see, Thornton, you're a dark man; that'll be all set down in the description. If they find out that within a few hours you've been turned into a fair one, they'll wonder, and I don't want them to wonder about anything. If they once start wondering, the pretty little trick I am proposing to play them will be spoiled; I shall have done all these things in vain. Thank you; I'm obliged by your solicitude; but my disappointment will only begin when I find that this stuff won't make what's left of my hair into, literally, a colourable imitation of yours."

He was rubbing handfuls of permanganate of potash on to his head with results which were again surprising. His fair hair was disappearing as his beard and moustache had done,

and his scalp was becoming crowned with what looked like inky locks instead. The effect, as he saw it in the looking-glass, seemed to afford him satisfaction.

"That's not so bad! not by any means so bad for a tyro in the art of hair-dyeing! Your candid opinion, Thornton. Don't I look about the top as if Nature had intended me to play Othello?"

"I don't know if you have such a relative; but you're rapidly approaching a point at which your own brother wouldn't know you, if you haven't reached it already."

"How goes the pink and white complexion with the coal-black hair?"

"Well, it looks striking, anyhow. It's not the sort of combination you're always meeting. If you want to attract attention you've gone the right way to do it."

"That's right; smile, my simple-minded youth! You don't suppose I'm going to leave a work of art half finished? that I'm going to spoil a masterpiece by omitting a necessary detail! I'm not that kind of person. The thing that's bothering me is how I'm going to attain to your olive skin; as a complexion producer, permanganate of potash seems a trifle drastic."

"I promise you that you're not going to disfigure yourself to that extent for Elsie's sake or for anyone's."

Snatching up the bottle which the other had been using Thornton threw it out of the open window. Otway only laughed.

"Dear me! here's an autocrat! throwing one of the finest disinfecting fluids going into the blackness of night! Didn't I tell you that my inclination didn't lean that way? I fancy this will suit me better."

"Man! that's polishing cream for brown boots!"

"Exactly; that why I'm using it; I want it to make me brown."

Before Thornton could stop him Otway—with closed eyes and tightly shut mouth—was smearing brown polishing liquid, not only all over his face, but over his neck and shoulders as well. By the time the process was concluded the final touch had been put to the transformation, no one would have recognised in this dark-skinned, black-haired, smooth-faced creature, with the nearly shaven crown, clad in the hideous brick-coloured clothes, liberally ornamented with broad arrows,

the immaculately attired, sunny-faced George Otway who had entered the room. Nor was the alteration which had taken place in Frank Thornton's appearance very much less striking. Although the other's garments hung on him a little loosely they fitted him very fairly, on the whole—certainly they served to bring his handsome personality into striking relief—a fact on which the other promptly commented.

"I say, Thornton, I had no idea what a good-looking chap you were. I'm afraid it's the lamentable truth that it is the tailor who makes the man!"

"And I had no idea that I could be so easily persuaded to allow another man—and he a stranger—to suffer in my place. And I'll be hanged if I stand it even now—you make me writhe with shame as I look at you. See here, Mr Otway——"

"See here, Mr Thornton, what money have you on you?"

"Money!—not a stiver!"

"I think you have. In the pockets you'll find some loose gold and silver, amounting, I believe, to between five and six pounds, and in the letter-case which is in the inside breast-pocket of the coat are notes for fifty more."

"Do you think I'll take your money?"

"I'm sure you will, unless you wish me to brain you with a poker. That amount of cash should be enough to see you off; so off you go, and good go with you."

"I'll not go. I tell you that I see the position as it really is at last. I'll not permit you to make a martyr of yourself for me—I'm not cur enough to suffer that."

"Thornton, the man in your position, who will not snatch at a chance to cleanse himself from the shame which stains him within and without, is a cur unspeakable. As your sister's brother, you shall not be that thing—if I can help it. You shall not encircle your sister's life—and your mother's life—with a halo of dishonour. I would rather take you by the throat, and show, that way, who is the stronger of the twain. You say you can prove your innocence. I am giving you the chance—freely, gladly, surely; prove it, sir. If you are the felon your prison guardians think you are, then off with those clothes again, back into your own. In that case—and in that case only—they will become you better than any others."

"I am as guiltless of the offence with which I'm charged as you are!"

"Then prove it, prove it! Don't stand there talking, chop-

ping phrases, splitting hairs, wasting time, knowing that the hounds, who bring ruin, are on your track, but do! do! do! To be caught, and jailed again—that's to slam the door of Heaven in your face—to be condemned for ever to the uttermost courts of hell. For me—let them come! let them take me—if they can! What does it matter?—what's the odds? It's an adventure, an experience, a new sensation, a game I'm playing, which I shall win in the end, and so laugh in their faces, especially if you're a true man, and not a liar, and can establish your innocence as you say you can."

"If I only thought——"

"Pardon me, Mr Thornton, it is not a question of what you think, as you will perceive yourself a little later on. Come downstairs; say good-bye to your mother, and play the man."

He half led, half pushed him down to the room where the mother was waiting, watching, listening, with anxious heart. She exclaimed at sight of them.

"How long you've been! I was afraid—— Why, Frank, I didn't know you. And—who is this?"

Otway laughed.

"This, Mrs Thornton, is yours obediently to command, George Otway, dressed for a fancy ball, which your son is immediately about to open. Now, Thornton, what's your programme?"

"I thought I'd walk to Hayford, a village about a couple of miles off, and take a trap from there to the other branch of the Brighton line, and so get on to town."

"Excellent! away you go! The next news we shall expect to have of you is that the guilty man's confessed!"

There was a hurried farewell between the mother and her son. She let him out through the front door, lingering with him for a moment in the hall, then returned to the little room in which Otway had remained.

"Mr Otway, if all turns out well——"

"All will turn out well; make up your mind that it shall, and it will. God is on the side of resolution."

"If all does turn out as we would desire, how shall I ever thank you?"

"Ah, Mrs Thornton, there's the crux. I'll show you the way in which to thank me all in good time. Don't imagine, for a single instant, that I'm a disinterested philanthropist! I'm more like a sixty-per-center, as you'll discover later on.

In the meantime I would ask you to give me your very kind attention for the space of about a minute. I've left at the station cloak-room—or what, I presume, passes as a cloak-room—a Gladstone bag. Here's the ticket for it. Please get it into your possession at the earliest possible moment. Open it; here's the key. You will find inside a leather wallet, containing a large number of bank-notes; keep them in safe custody. The rest of the contents—which chiefly consist of clothes—be so good as to store in some convenient spot. Possibly at some unexpected moment—it may be to-morrow, the day after, next week; I am afraid I cannot tell you exactly when—I shall reappear, and I may want that money, those clothes, in a hurry; so, in the exceeding goodness of your heart, have them where they'll be just handy. You understand?"

"I understand, and will do just as you tell me. But, in the meantime, what is it you propose to do?"

"In the meantime——"

"Hush! Isn't that some one in the garden?"

"In the meantime, Mrs Thornton, I intend to give that person, or persons—I think there's more than one—in the garden, the slip, just as, I fancy, they intend that I sha'n't. We'll see which intention is carried into the fullest execution. The game of hide-and-seek is commencing, in which the first move ought to come from me. Since that window through which I came appears to be blocked, isn't there another point from which I can make a start?"

"There is the back door; it is on the other side of the house. If you cross the kitchen-garden you will find a gate which will lead you into the paddock, and on the other side of the paddock is a lane which will take you to Chelsfold Wood; but, in the darkness, at this time of night, what you will do when you get there—if you ever do get there—I don't know."

"Nor I either, till the moment for action comes. I generally find that then a way opens. Trust in God, Mrs Thornton, and keep your powder dry; Old Noll's motto wasn't a bad one. I think I'll try that back door of yours. You understand what I said about that Gladstone bag?" She nodded; it seemed to be beyond her power to speak. "Ah! they're trying the window! When they find it's latched they'll turn their attention to the front door. Now's the time for that back door, if you'll lead the way."

They had been speaking in whispers; now they stole out of the room on tiptoe. As they went another effort was made from without to force the window open. The two grotesquely contrasting figures passed through the stone-floored scullery to the servants' entrance. Here Mrs Thornton paused to murmur:

"Someone may be waiting outside."

"Is there no point from which we can reconnoitre?"

"There's a little window on your right; perhaps I shall be able to see."

There was no light where they were. Mrs Thornton had guided him through the shadows with her hand upon his wrist. Now she moved a little away from him to where, as he supposed, there was a window, though from where he stood nothing could be seen. Presently she returned to his side, whispering:

"It is so dark that it is difficult to make out anything, but I don't think anyone is there."

"We'll chance it: 'nothing venture, nothing win.'"

"I will unfasten the door; keep quite still."

She opened the door, but so noiselessly that he only knew that it was open because the cool night air blew against his cheeks.

"Now, quick! as silently as you can; they are perhaps still on the other side of the house. Keep straight on and you will see the paddock gate shining white in the darkness! God go with you!"

"God stay with you—for Elsie's sake!"

He held her cool, trembling hand for a moment, and was gone. So soon as he was through the door she shut and bolted it—still not making a sound. When it was shut she sank on her knees and leaned her head against it and prayed, the tears trickling through her withered fingers.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

WITH George Otway luck went at first. He made his way as best he could over what seemed vegetables of different sorts.

"That's a cabbage!" he told himself. "And that's another! Hollo! surely that's a row of potatoes, it nearly sent me sprawling; and there's a second—I'm in the middle of a potato patch." He paused to listen. "It's a wonder they don't spot me; it seems to me that I'm making noise enough to wake the dead. What's that? beans, as I'm a sinner!—that beanstick nearly gouged my eye out! It seems to me that if one has to cross this kitchen-garden in the darkness it would be better to survey it in the daylight first." He perceived a suggestion of white gleaming through the shadows. "I suppose that is the gate. It is: I may thank my stars I have got as far as this alive. Now for the wonders of the paddock which lie beyond."

Here he found it easier going, only stumbling now and then over what might have been roots of trees. Presently he brought himself up against a hedge.

"This won't do—I can't get over this; I take it that there's another gate which leads into the lane."

Feeling his way along the hedge he came to one. In another second he was in what he presumed to be the lane, though the light was still so bad, that, ignorant of the landmarks by means of which country folks find their way in the darkness, remembering what Mrs Thornton had said, he could only make a vague guess at his whereabouts.

"I don't think she told me whether—to reach that wood—I ought to go to the left or to the right; this light's so deceptive that I shouldn't be much wiser if she had. Anyhow, here goes to chance it; for me one point's about as good as another."

When he had gone some little distance along the lane he came to a cottage which stood by the roadside. An open

door showed a lighted room beyond. On the doorstep a child was standing—a girl of about eight or nine. At sight of her he stopped, thinking to ask of her the way; it felt so stupid to be out in the darkness there, knowing nothing of his surroundings or where it was that he was going.

"Can you tell me, little girl, where this road leads to?"

As he spoke he advanced a little towards her, coming into the patch of light which shone through the open door, so that she could see his form and figure. The moment he did so, screaming like a creature possessed, she rushed back into the cottage.

"Why," exclaimed Otway, "what's the matter with the child?"

A woman appeared in the girl's place; a big, burly female, holding an infant in her arms.

"Who are you?" she demanded roughly. "What do you want?"

"I was only inquiring——" he began.

She did not wait for him to finish. Directly she caught sight of him, with an exclamation, she did as the child had done, drew back into the house; only, unlike the child, she shut the door behind her as she went. He could hear her turning the key in the lock and shooting the bolt. It was done so suddenly that it took him by surprise.

"That's rural civility to wayfarers! it's a recollection of the countryman's remark in *Punch*: 'There's a stranger; heave half-a-brick at him." Then, in an illuminating flash, it dawned upon him what it meant. "By George, what an idiot I am! It's His Majesty's uniform; if I hadn't forgotten that I had it on!"

It was odd, but he had. In the hurry and scurry of the last few moments it had wholly escaped his attention that he was in felon's attire. The child had seen this dreadful figure coming at her out of the darkness, and, ignorant of what it meant, had screamed and fled. The mother, wiser—if not much—had at least understood that this was the livery of crime. For all she could tell, this escaped felon was some desperate, murderous villain. In that lonely place her natural instinct was to put the protection of the door between herself and him.

So Otway was left out in the road to reflect how much clothes might be made to mean to a man.

"Well, it doesn't seem as if it would be of much use to press my inquiries there; that village mother might take my perseverance as clear proof of my natural depravity. If she has a gun, and were to take it into her head to shoot at me, I'm not sure that she wouldn't be justified of the law. Someone has said that all men are rogues. I take it from this beginning that I am embarked on the road which will make it clear, beyond all doubt, how very inconvenient it is to have been proved one. The worst of it is that, if any outwardly honest person does come along, that worthy woman will tell her dreadful tale; the hue and cry will be raised; and I shall have the whole countryside at my heels. After all, where's the harm of it? It will give them something to talk of for the rest of their lives!"

With this philosophic reflection George Otway pursued, if it could not be exactly called his way, then, at any rate, the way, and that with a degree of speed which seemed to suggest that he was as willing as not to put as wide a space as possible between that countryside and his heels. It was impossible, under the circumstances, to arrive at an accurate perception of distances; but when he had gone, as far as he could judge, about four miles, without seeing a sign of a human habitation or meeting a living soul, it began to seem to him that he had had enough of the road. Moreover, he was tired. He had been up practically the whole of the night before; had been travelling throughout the day, and in the course of the day a good deal had happened. He was becoming conscious of a desire for rest and for sleep. No useful purpose would be served by his tramping through the night. The morning would find him wearied out and out. In that condition he would not be likely to be so much the master of his wits as might be desirable. He was hungry too, and thirsty. So far excitement had enabled him to be oblivious of the fact that, with the exception of a hastily swallowed roll and butter at Liverpool, and an almost equally hasty lunch at Victoria, he had had neither bite nor sup. He was beginning to feel that he would give one of Ebenezer Pullen's bank-notes for a crust of bread and cheese and a pint of ale; but food seemed unattainable. Even if he had had any money in his one pocket, which was in his jacket—and it was empty—so far as he knew there was not a place anywhere from which anything could be

purchased; and even had there been it was doubtful if they would have sold to such a customer. The probabilities were, if food and drink had been procurable, that the only means by which he could have obtained them was by theft.

Hunger and thirst he must put up with; there was no means of satisfying them. But rest and sleep might be within his reach, and that was something.

He had been conscious for some little time that the road on either side had been lined with trees. A murmuring sound, as of waves breaking on a gently shelving shore, had hinted at a breeze stealing through a multitude of leaves. He thought of what Mrs Thornton had said about Chelsfold Wood. This might be it through which the road was passing. Few better places to take one's ease than under the cover of a giant tree. He scrambled through what seemed to be a ragged and ill-kept hedge upon his right, to come almost immediately in contact with the trunk of a tree. He did not stop to consider. He just subsided on to the ground at the foot, to find himself couched on what felt like a bed of moss. Before he suspected that unconsciousness was so close at hand, he was fast asleep.

And from slumber he was roused by for a moment he knew not what. He found himself sitting up straight, listening. He asked himself what it was for which he was listening. There was about him that sound in silence which is the note of a summer's night among trees; that curious commingling of quiescence with movement. It was so still that the faintest noise was audible; and yet the more his ear became accustomed to the atmosphere the more he understood that the place was full of noises. There was, first, that most languorous of harmonies, the sighing of the air among the leaves and branches, the underwoods, the grasses, and the bracken. He could hear its numerous refrain filling all the world, afar off, round about him. And then there were the movements of the woodland creatures—his accustomed ear began to distinguish them; the flight of the night birds, the humming of insects, even the passing of the moths; the sound of small feet moving like velvet pads over the ground; of unseen forms scurrying through vegetation—these things seemed to make the predominant stillness more obvious. In the silence of the summer night to what was he listening?

All at once, in sufficiently surprising fashion, the answer came. He sprang to his feet with a sudden bound, someone had called to him.

"George Otway! George Otway!"

Who could it be? what did it mean? Not once, but twice, his name came to him, as distinctly as he had ever heard it in his life, from among the trees. Not loudly, but with a penetrating clearness which set him trembling.

From what direction had it come? From a distance, or from close at hand? It was a question which, for the life of him, he could not answer. The speaker might have been behind the next tree; or, madness though it seemed, a hundred miles away.

All was still. It must have been imagination. It was ridiculous to suppose that any voice could convey to his mind the impression that it was coming to him from a distance —the absurdity of the thing!—of hundreds of miles. He must have woke out of some sort of dream, and the dream had followed him out of slumber. For a full minute he stood there, with clenched fists, wide-open eyes, straining ears. And then it came again, the voice!

"George Otway! George Otway!"

If anything, this time it was clearer, louder than before; yet still not so much loud as clear; with, in it, a strange acuteness which, as at first, set him all trembling. It was like a cry of pain. But from whom did it come—and whence? It must come from among the trees—it must! That suggestion of distance, which was stronger then before, was the sheerest absurdity. He could not hear someone calling to him from the other side of the world as, it seemed, he had done. He was the victim of a trick; of some hallucination. Someone, who had discovered his whereabouts, was leading him into a trap.

Yet—what a note there had been in it of pain. Surely nobody could have feigned that; it must have been an expression of natural suffering. And where had he heard the voice before? He racked his brain in an effort at recollection.

It came again—once! only once! But what a voice!

"George Otway!"

This time the loudness of the cry was more marked than the clearness, though it was clear enough. It came ringing

through the forest like a shriek. Beyond doubt some poor creature was suffering, in pain, in infinite distress. That cry could only have been torn from some anguished breast. Someone was in frightful need of instant help. It was worse than folly to stand there, hesitant. He dashed into the cruel, shrouding darkness, shouting as he went blundering among the trees.

"Who is it? where are you? what do you want?"

No one answered. He only flushed a cock pheasant, which rose with a discordant clatter into the air. He had startled all the creatures of the forest, so that the place was filled with the tumult of their vociferous alarm. But to his inquiries there was no response. And, presently, perceiving the futility of what he was doing, he paused in his wild career.

Momentary reflection showed him plainly what nonsense it was to suppose that anyone knew he was sleeping in that forest; that anyone could know. There were only two persons who could even guess; it was a million to one against Frank Thornton's doing that. And as for his mother, she had endeavoured to direct him to Chelsfold Wood. But, in the first place, she certainly could not know that he had reached it; he himself did not know. And, in the second, the voice had emphatically not been hers, though it had been a voice which he knew, and knew so well.

"Stuff! rubbish! bosh!"

He began to load himself with opprobrious epithets, telling himself that his wits were wool-gathering, that, like some raw cockney, he had allowed himself to be fooled. What he had heard had been some creature of the woodland which his excited fancy had transformed. He tried to think of some bird or beast whose cry could have caused him to be so crassly mistaken. Through his mind there flitted stories which country people tell, of the owl bewildering bibulous stragglers by hooting "Who-o-o! who-o-o!" amid the funereal trees. Some such trick his fancy must have played him. The explanation lay, no doubt, in just as simple a direction.

And yet, considering that this must be so, it was strange in what a state of agitation he still was; he whom it required so much to agitate. Although the night air was cool and sweet he was damp with perspiration, and seldom a man who suffered less from heat than he did. And it was as if

every nerve in his body had been pricked with a pin; he was still all of a tremble. The reason, doubtless, was that his nervous system had been working at high pressure for some time, so that now, in the unusual environment in which he found himself, it had only needed a little thing to unhinge him altogether.

Of course, that was the reason; there could be no other. It was foolish to seek for remote causes when the real ones were obviously close at hand. What he wanted, for brain and body too, was rest—more rest. Let him get to sleep again as soon as he could. Sleep was the sovereign healer. And let him hope that, this time, he might not dream. Since it was useless, in that Egyptian darkness, to try to select a resting-place, he did as he had done before—he sank down just where he was, and courted slumber.

This time vainly; for hardly had his limbs touched the ground than the cry came again—and again—and again; rising, with each repetition, in a crescendo scale:

"George Otway! GEORGE OTWAY!! GEORGE OTWAY!!!"

As a mere example of the power of the human voice the effect was sufficiently amazing; the entire forest seemed to ring with it. It filled the air to the exclusion of all other sounds. And in it the note of pain was so insistent that, to the startled man, it seemed to penetrate to the very marrow in his bones. The notion that that cry—that expression of human anguish—could proceed from a bird or beast became, on the instant, too preposterous for sober consideration. Someone wanted help; someone—no matter how the knowledge had been acquired—who knew that he was there. Though he had to search the forest through it was for him to render it. It was out of the question that he should allow such an appeal to go unanswered, cost him what it might. So once more he went crashing blindly through the trees, shouting as he went:

"I'm coming! fear nothing! I'll be with you in a minute! only endure a little longer!"

It was as if his soul was crying to this other soul.

But the same thing happened as before: the farther he went the clearer it became to him what a wild-goose chase this was on which he was engaged. The same questions returned to him with added force—from whom could the cry have come? and from where? It must have come from

the forest; or, at least, from the immediate neighbourhood. And yet there was something tugging, not at his intellect, but at his heart-strings, which told him that it came from a distance which — relatively — was infinite. And — again as before — the farther he went the stronger this conviction became; until, at last, staying his advance, as if assured of its futility, he put his hand up to his bewildered head, inquiring of himself:

"What does it mean! what does it mean!"

And, in that instant, he understood — that is, in a degree. For, while he pressed his palms against his throbbing temples, the cry was repeated, this time with a new and most amazing addition:

"George Otway! Come to Elsie! Come!"

Then he knew that soul had indeed cried unto soul, and that this was the voice which, sleeping and waking, he had heard so much of late — the voice of the girl whom he had seen on the previous night in that hideous house in Sefton Park, and who had been snatched from his sheltering arms. Of a surety, well might he ask himself what it meant; how it came about that, in that woodland place, he should hear her crying to him in the night. And, while he wondered, her voice came to him again; if anything, louder, clearer still:

"Help! help! help!"

In what dire extremity she was — in what an agony of distress — that she should call to him like that from afar. He did not ask himself how this miracle had happened; how, apparently, the ordinary course of nature had been turned aside to permit of this strange, incredible thing. Inquiries of that sort might come later on. At present the only point of interest with which he was concerned was how he could render the help of which, plainly — as it seemed to him — she stood in such instant, pressing need.

Clad like a felon — wearing the insignia of another's shame — bedaubed, disfigured, penniless, he could do nothing. He was worse than helpless. With all hands against him, what could his hand do for another? The first thing necessary was to relieve himself of those prison rags. Then, attired in his own clothes, money in his pocket, something might be done, and should be, quickly. The difficulty was to get within reach of that Gladstone bag. Possibly by now, if Mrs Thornton had followed his instructions implicitly, it was

at the vicarage. He had but to return there. The hunters, finding that their quarry was away, might have given up the search; all might still be well. But to return was not easy. If he waited till the morning the whole country would be on the alert; every creature in it would be on the lookout for him; to elude them all would be impossible. While, in the darkness, not knowing where he was—having lost all sense of direction—how was he to find the way?

Yet it would have to be found. It was the more practicable, less perilous adventure of the two. In the daylight he would not dare to move a step. Darkness would lend him that thing of all others most to be desired—cover. He might pass through the night, no one knowing of his going or of his coming. It was worth trying. He would try!

His trouble began before he took his first step; he had to ask himself in which direction it should be taken. Which was the way out of the wood? He turned slowly round, muttering objurgations beneath his breath. All ways were the same to him. Where he stood he could scarcely see his hand before his face. For all he could tell he might be in the heart of the forest, or on the edge; on the side nearest to the lane by which he had come, or a mile from it.

But it was no use dallying. He would have to move in some direction. So he moved. As he moved he caught his foot against some unseen obstacle; he went head foremost to the ground. As he fell his head struck against what was perhaps a tree-stump. For a second or two he lay half stunned. When he raised himself, still shaky, a voice rang through the darkness.

"Who goes there? Halt!"

There was no question this time as to hallucination, nor any doubt as to the direction from which the voice might come. The utterance had about it the unmistakable ring of authority; the speaker was probably within a dozen yards of where he stood. He had fancied, as he had been lying on the ground, struggling against the obscuration of his faculties, that mysterious movements were taking place quite close to where he was. This was what those movements had portended. An enemy was upon him—a gamekeeper, a policeman—he knew not what. Trying to get the better of his dizziness—to collect his senses—he moved towards a

tree which was within reach of his hand, crouching close up to the trunk.

The voice came again.

"Is that you, Frank Thornton? We hear you. Don't try to move, or we shall fire."

"We?" Then there were more than one: the enemy was upon him in force.

Just then something happened which showed him that the game was up; that escape was hopeless; that that help for which that cry in the night had asked would have to be postponed till God alone knew when. A dog—seemingly a puppy—came round the trunk of the tree, sniffing at his legs, making that fuss which only a foolish pup would do. Unless he took the creature by the throat, and there and then choked the life right out of him, the prison doors would soon be slamming in his face. And the chance of doing even that was suddenly at an end, for all at once the shutter of a lantern was turned, a gleam of blinding light was flashing in his face, and out of the darkness two prison warders emerged, each with a gun in his hand.

He arrived at his resolution on the instant. He threw out his hands, with a laugh.

"You've got me! It's a fair catch!" he cried.

Directly after there were gyves upon his wrists.

CHAPTER XIX

THE VILLAGE LOCK-UP

GEORGE OTWAY spent the remainder of that night in the local lock-up, his captors supposing him to be Frank Thornton, escaped felon. On the way to the lock-up one of the warders said to him, jeeringly:

"So you haven't had such a very long run after all."

"No," answered George, "I haven't."

He laughed. He would have been in the best of spirits had he not continually seemed to hear Elsie's voice calling for help: to his mind this fresh adventure on which he was entering promised so much amusement. At the moment they were tramping through the pitch-black lanes. He was not only handcuffed, but to each wrist a chain was fastened, which was attached to a warder's belt on either side of him. The warder on his right flashed his lantern in his face. Suspicion was in his tone.

"You're a cool hand if you can laugh like that in the mess you're in. You'll take a bit of watching. Don't you think you can give us the slip a second time."

"I'm sure I can't."

Otway laughed again. The officer gave a tug at his chain as one might tug at a dog when one desires to keep it in order.

The prisoner was still. He was wondering if his disguise would not be penetrated by the local police. They surely knew the vicar's son too well to be taken in by a stranger. As it turned out, he need not have anticipated anything of the kind. It seemed likely that the village only boasted a single policeman. That dignitary had accompanied the search party, was with them still—was, indeed, only a foot or two in front—showing the way through the strange country and the darkness, lantern in hand.

The lock-up proved to be the nearest cottage. Their guide opened the door with a key which he took from his trousers

pocket. As they entered, a voice—a feminine voice—called to them from somewhere above.

"Tom, is that you?"

"Yes, Pollie; it's me. You go to sleep. I expect I shall be up all night, I shall."

There was a touch of importance in the speaker's voice which was possibly intended to be impressive. If so, it apparently failed to impress the lady overhead.

"Up all night? That's a nice thing! How does anyone suppose you're going to do your duty if you're up all night and all day too? You haven't had hardly a wink of sleep the whole of this last week to my certain knowledge. You'll be killing yourself before long if this goes on; that's what you'll be doing."

The policeman did not seem as if he were in any imminent danger of a tragic end, nor did he seem as if his recent days and nights had been so sleepless as the voice above declared. He was a large, corpulent man, who looked as if he had as easy a time as a representative of the law could reasonably expect, even in a Sussex village. Beyond doubt jobs like the one in hand did not come his way every day; or, probably, for the matter of that, every year. As he replied to the unseen speaker his manner took on even an extra shade of dignity. He, at any rate, was conscious of the solemnity of the occasion.

"I've got to do my duty. That's enough. You go to sleep. Let's have no more of it."

But the lady above was not to be so easily silenced.

"Well, I never did! The idea of your talking to me like that, Tom Parsons! I never knew when I married a policeman that I was going to be treated as if I were dirt; and me not yet married to you six months."

There was something audible above which sounded as if it were a sob; if it was, the lady must have had an extremely sensitive nature. However that might have been, the mere sound seemed to touch Mr Parsons to the quick. He looked about him with obvious irresolution; husbands of six months' standing are, sometimes, sympathetic.

"I ain't treating you as if you were dirt."

The sounds above continued. Indeed, they became more conspicuous; the very voice was broken.

"Then I don't know what you are a-doing, Tom Parsons,

that I don't." A pause; then an inquiry. "Have you got young Mr Thornton?"

"We have, of course; what do you think?"

"Surely to goodness you ain't all alone with him down there!"

"Certainly not; don't be so ridiculous. There's three warders from Lewes Gaol."

"Then I should think they could let you come to bed. Surely it don't take four great, strong men to look after one young gentleman; I don't think much of them three warders from Lewes gaol if it does."

The outspoken expression of opinion seemed to disconcert Mr Parsons as much as it amused the three officers alluded to. One of them took upon himself to answer.

"You're quite right, Mrs Parsons. We're quite capable of looking after our prisoner ourselves; we should be a queer lot if we weren't, and we won't keep your husband from you another minute. We're married men ourselves, and we know how hard it is on a lady, what's all alone in bed, to be deprived of the society of her husband."

"Do you hear that, Tom Parsons? Are you coming upstairs?"

"Yes, I do hear; and I'm not a-coming. I hope I know what's due to myself better than that if you don't. I'm surprised at you, Pollie, I really am; going on like this when you know what a serious matter this is I've got on hand. Why, if I was to let these gentlemen sit up here all alone by themselves it might go against me all the rest of my life. You don't want to ruin your husband, do you, Pollie?"

Apparently this pathetic appeal was not without effect. The next remark was of a different tenor.

"I can't make out what they want to bring him here for at all. Why can't they take him straight off to Lewes Gaol instead of putting the responsibility on you?"

The warder who had previously spoken explained:

"There's no responsibility on your husband, ma'am; not a little bit. The responsibility's all ours; we're the responsible parties. As for taking him to Lewes straight away, it's not to be done. For one thing, there's no trains, and we can't take him all the way in a fly. We'll clear him off by the very first train in the morning, we promise you that; but in the meantime I'm afraid we shall have to claim Mr Parsons' hospitality."

"That's all right; I understand exactly how it is, I'm no dunderhead. No more's my wife; she'll understand too when she gives herself time to think things over. Now, Pollie, you go straight off to sleep, and be a good girl."

"It's all very well for you to talk about going off to sleep, but it's another thing for me to do it." A pause. Then a sudden variation. "And look here, Tom Parsons, don't you go emptying that barrel of beer. It'll be over a week before the brewer comes, and the barrel's more than half empty as it is."

The lady above evidently had the gift of saying plainly what she had to say. At this further demonstration of her powers in that direction there was silence below. Mr Parsons looked as if his wife's eloquence was bearing on him a little hardly. The three warders exchanged glances with each other. Then they glanced at him, and as they glanced they winked, and as they winked he winked too. His fresh-coloured face took on a somewhat brighter hue; he grinned, thrusting his thumbs inside his belt. He assumed what he doubtless meant to be a soothing tone.

"Now, Pollie, don't you worry; the beer won't hurt us."

"No,—I'm more afraid of your hurting the beer."

"My dear! my dear! it isn't like you to be talking like this. Anybody'd think you begrudged a couple of pints."

"I don't want you to swallow a couple of gallons and leave us to go dry until the brewer comes."

"That's all right, my girl; we ain't boozers, none of us—especially when engaged on a serious job like this—or we shouldn't be a-occupying the positions we are a-occupying. You turn over, and you'll be asleep before you know it."

The same suspicious sounds which had been heard before became distinctly audible again.

"Aren't you even coming upstairs, Tom, to say good-night?"

The eldest warder of the three clapped the policeman on the shoulder.

"That's what the lady wants; she wants you to go upstairs and say good-night. Giving her a kiss or two won't do you no harm, and from what I can see I shouldn't be surprised if it did her good."

The shamefaced Mr Parsons, acting on this hint, departed, with the evident intention of appeasing—if possible—his almost too demonstrative wife. So soon as he had left the room the

same warder said, addressing Mr Otway—he was a grey-haired man, with a not unpleasant face — as he spoke his manner was paternal:

"You see policemen have got hearts as well as other men."

"I never for a moment thought they hadn't."

"No; perhaps not, but there's lots of you chaps do think so. And they think us warders are like the screws they call us after—hard and sharp, and without any sort of feeling."

"I assure you that so far as I am personally concerned it is quite the other way. I am confidently expecting to receive at your hands the very kindest treatment."

The warder's eyes twinkled; the lines of his mouth became more distinctly defined.

"Ah!—that's another question. You knew what you had to expect before you started on your little jaunt this afternoon, or you ought to have known if you didn't. If you're wise, what you've got to do now is make the best of things, and give as little trouble as you can."

Otway nodded.

"So I suppose." He added, with a smile: "But I always do try to make the best of things."

There was something in the quality of the smile which the officer apparently disliked. His manner all at once became a trifle surlier.

"That's all right. Then you won't mind our putting these ornaments round your ankles. Those legs of yours seem as if they can cover the ground: we don't want to have no more running after you just yet awhile."

He had taken from a capacious pocket in the tail of his coat what looked like an extra large-sized pair of handcuffs. They were joined together by a brightly polished curb chain perhaps a foot in length. The warder held them out in front of him as if they were pleasant to look at.

"Pretty, I call them—and useful too. Not heavy, yet they'd take some breaking. Scarcely scale over a pound; but if a chap was fastened with a six-inch cable he couldn't hardly be safer held. I don't say that there isn't anything a bit heavier and a trifle less elegant where we're going to; in fact, I shouldn't be surprised if you were to make the acquaintance of something a good deal heavier before very long; you'll probably find someone who'll be of opinion that you'll

be all the better for it. But in the meantime this is a handy little trifle; you won't be able to get rid of it so easy as perhaps you think. It'll at any rate keep you safe until the first train in the morning, and that I'll swear. Stand still there while we put 'em on."

George Otway stood still. Click! click! the fetters were snapped about his ankles; he found himself unable to move in any direction more than a few inches at a time. The grey-haired warder contemplated the result with obvious approval.

"I don't fancy you'll be able to do much running away while you've got those on."

"I don't fancy that I shall."

George Otway laughed. The whole situation struck him as exceedingly comical,—it seemed almost incredible that all this while no one was finding him out. His likeness to the absent man must be much greater than he had imagined. The three warders eyed him a little sourly,—his trick of easy laughter was evidently one for which they had an instinctive distaste. The shortest of the three commented on it—a cobby fellow, with short, bristly black beard and aggressive eyebrows.

"You're easily amused."

"You think so. I'm not so sure of that. Generally I find it rather hard to be amused."

"Lawyer, are you? got something to say every time? I know your sort,—turned the key on plenty of 'em in my time. Perhaps you won't have so much to say by the time we've done with you."

The speaker's looks and manner expressed extreme disapprobation. The policeman's steps were heard lumbering down the stairs. He reappeared in the room, to be greeted by the cobby man.

"You've been some time saying good-night to that good lady of yours, Mr Parsons. Perhaps you was forgetting that you haven't shown us where we're to put this here escaped prisoner of ours. We don't want to lose him again, you bet."

The constable showed traces of embarrassment. His face was redder than it had been; there was about him a general air of fluster. His attempts to ignore the fact only brought it into greater prominence.

"Sorry if I have kept you waiting; but, the truth is, it's the key that I was after—the key of the lock-up. Keep it up-

stairs, I do. As I haven't had occasion to use it for awhile it seems somehow to have got mislaid. But I've found it."

He flourished a huge key in their faces as if to prove that that was so. The cobby man was still acrid.

"Seems to me, Mr Parsons, that you've got your own way of doing things round these parts; wouldn't quite do for Lewes Gaol."

There was something in this speech which the policeman resented. His manner became suddenly huffy.

"When I'm going to apply for a situation in Lewes Gaol I'll remember to ask you to tell me just what's wanted; but I wasn't thinking of applying as I knows of. This ain't Lewes Gaol."

The grey-haired warder endeavoured to appease him.

"No offence, Mr Parsons, no offence! You're better off where you are, I can tell you that."

Behind the constable's back the speaker winked at the cobby man, who pursed his lips as if he found it difficult to restrain himself from answering back. The policeman was still aggrieved.

"That's as may be. My ways please my official superiors, and if they don't please them as are not my official superiors, it seems to me, as far as I'm concerned, that that's neither here nor there."

"Quite right, Mr Parsons, quite right. You know your duty; of course you do."

The grey-haired man was aiming a perfect battery of winks at the cobby man, who was stolidly staring straight in front of him, as if he saw nothing and no one.

"I ought to. I've been in the force going on for seven years without a mark against me, and this is my second sole charge."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you was a sergeant before long, Mr Parsons—that I shouldn't. It's men like you what's wanted in the upper ranks."

At this the cobby man allowed himself to indulge in a transitory grin which was pregnant with the most dire significance, but it was of such a very fleeting nature that it had vanished before the policeman turned.

"Here's the lock-up for you. Lock's a bit stiff—wants a new one, that's my belief—so I've told 'em over at headquarters, but they don't seem to be in no particular hurry to give me one."

Mr Parsons had been opening—with some difficulty—a massive door which had been let into the wall at one side. As he swung it back upon its hinges a sort of large bare cupboard was revealed beyond. The grey-haired warder entered it, with an inquiring air.

"So this is the lock-up, is it? That's a good solid door you've got there."

"It is solid."

"More solid than these walls seem to be." He was tapping them with the butt of his carbine. "What's beyond?"

"My garden."

"Why, they seem to be only one brick thick."

"That's all." Mr Parsons indulged in a burst of frankness. "It don't take much to get through that wall, I can tell you that."

"So I should say. Strikes me that a heavy man has only got to lean back sudden to find himself outside."

"It's not to be done so easy as that—not quite so easy, it ain't. Still, it is to be done. I've only been here four months myself. The man who was here before I was, he got a chap in here one night fighting drunk. He must have hit out in the middle of the night, because he pretty well brought the whole place down about his ears. In the morning they found him fast asleep in the garden."

"Did they? That sounds as if he was in the country. And I suppose the man that was here before you were heard nothing of what was going on?"

"Not a sound; slept like a top through it all. It must have come down with no more noise than if it was a pack of cards."

"When they rebuilt it didn't they cover it with a sheet of paper so as to make it stronger?"

"Just used the same bricks over again; laid 'em in fresh mortar—that's all they did. It cost eighteen-and-tuppence; I've seen the bill."

"Have you? Cost as much as eighteen-and-tuppence, did it?"

"You see, it's this way: we never have desprit characters hereabouts; never! never heard tell of one! No one's ever locked up round here; there's never no one to lock up. It's all done by summons—that's how it's done. Why, I've only locked up one party the whole going-on-for seven years

I've been in the force, and that was a boy as threw a stone through a grocer's window what his mother owed a bill to. If I was to lock up anybody I should take him over to Selston—that's what I should do."

"Oh, you would, would you? It's a pity you didn't mention these facts before you brought us here. How far might Selston be from this?"

"A good nine miles by the road, and a bit over."

"Is it? I think we'll stay where we are till the first train leaves in the morning. Thornton, you come here." The warder was still in the lock-up of whose powers of safe-keeping such flattering things had been said. George Otway went to him. "You sit there." He pointed to a board, which, running across one end, was intended to serve as a seat. "You've heard what Mr Parsons has been saying, so don't you lean back too heavily against this wall. We're not going to shut that door: we're going to leave it wide open. One of us will always be right bang in front of it, and he'll have a gun. We've all got guns. See! there's mine!" He thrust the muzzle of his carbine right under Otway's nose. "And they're loaded, our guns are. If you lean back too heavy, or so much as move off this seat without permission, they'll be pointed straight at your head. We were entitled to shoot you down like a rabbit in the wood there. A prison-breaker's got no rights: we officers can shoot him at sight. If you give us any more of your tricks we'll shoot you. We'll load you up with lead, as sure as you're alive; so the more clearly you understand that the more comfortable you're likely to be."

By way of answer Otway laughed again.

"Thanks for telling me; it's very good of you to make the position so plain."

"Mind it is plain, that's all. I wouldn't laugh quite so much if I was you. There's nothing to laugh about in the scrape you're in that I can see. Now, down you sit."

Mr Parsons spoke.

"I don't know that that seat will hold a man of your weight."

Otway sat down. The board creaked as he did so, but it was only as the strain came on it first.

"It's a bit creaky perhaps, but I think its constitution will stand the shock. I only hope you gentlemen won't shoot if it does let me down. By the way, Mr Parsons, I don't remember to have seen you before."

"And I don't remember to have seen you. Seeing that I've only been here four months; and that, so far as I know, you haven't set foot in the place since I have been here, and that I came from pretty near the other side of the country, I don't see how I could have seen you."

This explained how it was that the village constable had failed to perceive, at a glance, that he was not Frank Thornton. But there still remained the fact that the warders had been taken in also; so with an eye to enlightenment, he pursued his inquiries with the same light-hearted air:

"Nor do I remember to have encountered either of you three gentlemen. Surely we were not companions in the train."

The grey-haired warder answered, with, in his tone, more than a touch of crustiness:

"If we three gentlemen, as you put it—or either of us—had been your companions in the train we'd have kept you in the train: you wouldn't have got out of it alive; you can take my word for that."

The cobby man announced:

"If you'd tried on any of your games with me there'd have been an end of one of us; I rather fancy there'd have been an end of you. I may be wrong; but I never have been wrong in a thing of that sort as yet."

The third warder, who seemed to be a silent sort of person, gave his view of the position in a very few words.

"No prisoner ever got away alive from an officer who was worth his salt, and I don't care who hears me say it."

The grey-haired warder shook his head.

"I don't know that I'm prepared to quite go so far as that myself, prisoners having given even good officers the slip for the time—only for the time, mind!—to my certain knowledge. But nothing of the kind has happened to either of us three so far, and we're not proposing that it should happen now."

"We're not," agreed the cobby man.

The third warder said nothing; he only examined the trigger of his carbine.

CHAPTER XX

THE WARDER GOES

THERE was a momentary silence. The three warders stood together in front of the open lock-up, eyeing George Otway, seated on the board at the other end, as if he were some strange creature. Each held his carbine by the muzzle, the butt resting on the floor. The prisoner wondered what would happen in case of an accidental discharge. The probability seemed to be that there would be one warder less, or else there would be a surprise for Mrs Parsons overhead. The policeman leaned in easy attitude against the wall. His interest in the proceedings was almost ostentatiously slight, as if he wished to let the others understand how completely he was conscious that the prisoner was not his. Presently the grey-haired warder drew the back of his hand across his lips. As Mr Parsons happened to be looking at the ceiling, possibly thinking of the lady who was above it, the gesture went unnoticed. On its being repeated, still without attracting attention, he tried speech instead.

"Dry work this."

"It is dry work," agreed the cobby man.

The third warder only looked as if it were. Mr Parsons said nothing; he continued to gaze at the ceiling. It really seemed as if the bucolic intellect—in the person of a rural representative of the law—was a little difficult to penetrate. With a sigh, as of delicate regret, the grey-haired warder came more directly to the point.

"Mr Parsons, didn't your good lady say something about a barrel of beer?"

Then Mr Parsons began to awake to the situation. Bringing his eyes down from the ceiling he fixed them on the grey-haired warder's face.

"She did say something about less than half-a-barrel."

"Half-a-barrel, I understood her to say, of as good beer as ever came into the house."

"It is good beer."

"Ah!" The grey-haired warder sighed again. The rustic mind was very slow. "Mr Parsons, me and my two friends here haven't had so much as bite or sup not since early this afternoon. You mightn't think it, but it's a fact."

"Not since early this afternoon?"

"Not since early this afternoon. That's a good long time ago, as I needn't tell you, and we've done some moving about; and, so far as grub's concerned, we're men of regular habits. The consequence is that, for what we're feeling, peckish isn't the word, nor yet dry, neither. We could put away anything."

"I could," agreed the cobby man.

The third warder, as usual, only looked as if he could.

"Now, Mr Parsons, if you was to get us a nice plate of bread and cheese, and a good glass of ale, you might charge it to the county if you liked."

"Do you think the county'd pay?"

"Think?—I'm sure! We'll endorse your claim, that's what we'll do, and then the county'll pay you anything you like to ask—in reason."

"If I was sure the county'd pay!"

The silent warder was moved to unexpected eloquence.

"Look here, Parsons, if you've got any doubts about the county, sooner than sit up all night starving with hunger, and parched with thirst, I'll pay you for your stuff out of my own pocket; a price that'll give you a handsome profit, too. I've got money."

"So far as that goes," observed the grey-haired warder with dignity, "we've all of us got money."

"Of course we have!" exclaimed the cobby man.

"How much——" Mr Parsons, having got so far, paused, to presently proceed, with an amount of hesitation which still suggested doubt: "How much beer could each of you chaps do with?"

"About a pailful," declared the silent man, then added: "I could do with two."

"Two pailful!" Mr Parsons stared, apparently failing to suspect that there might be anything ironical in the speaker's proclamation of his capacity. "You won't get two pailfuls here, nor yet one. My missis tells me that there ain't hardly more than a gallon left in the cask; and the brewer, he won't be round for more than a week."

The third warder, having been driven into speech, showed himself to be possessed of a flow of language.

"The brewer! Ain't there publics? If the publics was open do you think we'd trouble you? They will be open by the time you want a sup in the morning. If three chaps was to come to my place, same as we've come to yours, I wouldn't see 'em sinking for want of a drop of ale—no, I'm not that sort."

Mr Parsons remained, seemingly, in silent contemplation. The three warders watched him anxiously; never before had they realised how slow the bucolic mind—and body—could be. Then he announced the decision at which, by such laborious processes, he had arrived.

"I'll go and draw a pint a-piece, that'll be two quarts: my missus has got a jug as just holds it."

The tension on the warders' faces relaxed; the grey-haired one heaved a sigh of sincere relief. He hailed the policeman as he was going.

"That's more like it, Mr Parsons; I knew you were a man on whom we could rely. Fill the jug up to the top, never mind about a head on it, let it be all beer. And, look here, don't forget the bread and cheese. And, by-the-way, you might bring a mouthful of bread and cheese for that chap in there." He motioned to Otway. "We're not going to stand him beer, but a mug of water wouldn't do him any harm."

When the constable had departed in search of the much-desired refreshment the grey-haired warder's manner became quite genial.

"Now, chaps, gather round, let's get chairs. It don't cost no more to sit than to stand—at least, I hope Mr Parsons won't charge us no more—and we've had about enough of standing for just once in a while. We can all of us keep an eye on our gentleman inside there while we're sitting down—while we're enjoying a glass of as good ale as ever came inside this house."

Here the grey-haired warder winked.

Four wooden chairs were placed in a semi-circle fronting the open lock-up. The warders placed themselves on three of them. The fourth was left for Mr Parsons. Some minutes, however, elapsed before he returned. They could hear his lumbering movements in the room beyond. The third warder gave expression to the common feeling.

"I hope he ain't found that cask emptier than he thought."

"I hope not," echoed the cobby man, with every appearance of sincerity.

There came the sound of a running tap.

"That's not beer," surmised the grey-head.

They listened.

"No," pronounced the silent man; "that's water. I hope he's not putting water into that beer to make up for any shortage."

The anxiety on their faces returned. Seemingly they were racked by a haunting fear that their host might be guilty of anything. When his portly form appeared in the doorway, bearing a number of articles before him on a tray, each man turned to him with looks of severity.

"Glad to see you, Mr Parsons," announced the grey-head. "We was just beginning to be afraid that you weren't coming."

The policeman said nothing. He placed his tray on a small round table which was covered with American cloth. With much deliberation he handed a plate of bread and cheese to each of the warders and a fourth to Otway, together—in his case—with a large earthenware mug full of water.

"Thank you, Mr Parsons. It's very good of you to take so much trouble; this bread and cheese looks delicious."

It did look appetising, and the prisoner drank from his mug with every appearance of unqualified enjoyment. Mr Parsons filled four similar jugs with ale out of a large white jug which had a bull's head to serve as a spout. He handed each man one. The grey-haired warder received his with a beaming smile.

"That's the stuff, Mr Parsons, that's the right kind of ale. Never saw a drop of beer which gave greater pleasure to my eye. Now, gentlemen, I'll give you a toast. Here's to the County Police Force, coupled with the name of its excellent representative, Mr Thomas Parsons."

Each man drank to the toast, including Mr Parsons himself, who appeared to be unconscious of there being anything incongruous in his doing so. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Much obliged," he said. "Same to you."

The three warders seemed relieved, as if a weight had been lifted off their chests.

"That's a drop of good ale, that is," declared the grey-head. "There's nothing like it."

"First-rate ale," admitted the silent man.

For the first time the cobby warder permitted himself to differ. He was smacking his lips with the air of a connoisseur; there was a suggestion of doubt about his eyes.

"Seems to me it's a trifle bitterish. I may be wrong, but there it is."

His grey-haired colleague laughed.

"It's your stomach what's bitterish, that's what it is. It's so long since it's had anything inside it that it's forgotten what good ale is. I like my beer to have a nip in it, I do, so that I can feel I'm swallowing something as it goes down my throat. Well, gentlemen, I'm going to give you another toast"; he winked, "which will help you to empty what's left in your mugs, so as not to keep our friend, who's waiting to fill 'em up again, waiting. I ask you to drink to a lady who's an ornament to her sex, and just the wife for a future sergeant of police, if not an inspector. Need I say, in this company, that I'm alluding to Mrs Thomas Parsons. Here's to her!"

And there was to her; Mr Parsons again joining in drinking to the toast. So heartily was it honoured that by all four of them the mugs were emptied; each one tilting up his own particular mug, so that the last remaining drops might be drained into his mouth.

The effect produced by the prolonged libation was of an extraordinary kind, one which was undoubtedly unexpected by the drinkers.

No sooner, for instance, had the grey-haired warder assimilated the last remaining drop, than a startled look came on his face, to be immediately followed by one more peculiar still. He half rose from his seat.

"There's something the matter," he mumbled.

Apparently something choked his utterance; at least, he got no further than those four words. Instead of concluding his sentence he made a sort of paralytic grab at his carbine, which he had leaned against the back of his chair, only to send it clattering to the floor. Fortunately it was not discharged upon the spot. In what seemed to be an effort to stay its progress he himself went after it, falling in a sort of helpless lump right on top of the ill-treated weapon. The empty beer

mug dropping from his hand was smashed to pieces. Where he had fallen the warder remained, uttering, for a second or two, a series of groans which it was unpleasant to listen to. Then he was still.

His companions were affected with even greater celerity than he had been. The cobby man's hands descended on either side of him, his body slipped forward on the chair, his head fell back, his mouth opened; in a flash he seemed to have sunk into stertorous slumber.

The silent officer, who had complained of the bitterish taste, appeared to have been stricken by a painful physical sensation. Clapping his hands to the pit of his stomach, an internal spasm appeared to twist him right round in his chair, toppling it over, with him on top of it, so that he lay quite still, athwart the seat of the chair, in about as uncomfortable a position as he could very well have chosen. The policeman was overcome more quickly than either of the others; he just collapsed on to the floor as if the bones had been taken clean out of him, and stayed there.

The transformation had been so sudden, so unexpected, and so complete, that Mr Otway felt for a moment incapable of believing the evidence of his own eyes. One instant the four men had been sitting there in front of him, drinking jovially together, the next they were lying there like so many senseless logs. He stared, and stared, and stared. Then, as none of them showed any disposition to move, he muttered to himself:

"It occurs to me that there must have been something radically wrong with the constitution of the best drop of beer that ever came into the house; it's lucky that they confined me to water."

All at once he heard a creaking sound without. Someone was descending the stairs.

"Hollo!—the plot thickens! Who comes now?"

Although he could see nothing from where he was, he was aware that the door which led into the passage had been opened with as little noise as possible. As a matter of fact, a young woman had put her head into the room; by no means a bad looking young woman either. The accident that her hair was hanging down her back, and that she seemed to have put on her clothes in a hurry, was not in any way prejudicial to her personal appearance. After she had taken

a survey of the condition of affairs inside the room, she inquired in a voice which was rendered tremulous probably by a mixture of agitation and apprehension:

"Is that you, Mr Frank?"

Otway unhesitatingly replied:

"Pray step right in; always pleased to receive visitors."

That the new-comer had an intimate acquaintance with the tone of Frank Thornton's voice was immediately disclosed by the astonishment she showed as Otway answered.

"That's not Mr Frank's voice!" she cried.

Coming hurriedly forward into the room, advancing to the open lock-up, she stared at its occupant. The disguise did not take her in for a single second.

"You're not Mr Frank! Who are you?"

"I hope that I'm the next thing to being Mr Frank, since I believe I have some title to call myself Mr Frank's best friend."

The woman began to wring her hands, seeming on the verge of tears.

"But—I don't understand!—they told me he was here!"

"I flatter myself that if it hadn't been for me he would have been here. As it is, I trust that long ere this he's safe in London. We've changed clothes; that's the explanation of the mystery, my dear woman. I chanced to meet him at the vicarage, flying for something dearer than life, so I took his place and he took mine. As the gentlemen on the floor didn't happen to be in the secret, here I am."

"Is it true what you're saying? Are you sure you're his friend? Is he really safe?"

"Yes;—to all three of your questions."

"Oh, what have I done! If I'd only known I wouldn't have moved a finger!"

"Then, possibly, it's fortunate for me that you didn't know. May I ask if I'm indebted for what has happened to Mr Parsons?"

"Mr Parsons?—my Tom—do you mean has he done this? The idea! why he wouldn't have done it for worlds; if he finds out he'll feel like killing me!"

"May I inquire what it is you've done?"

"Done?—me? I've done nothing."

"Is that so? Then who has done something?"

"No one's done anything; no one! It's been an accident,

that's what it's been, just an accident. I suffer dreadfully from faceache. I got some stuff which does it good and makes you sleep. I kept it in a jug. The jug happened to be hanging on the peg nearest to the barrel. I suppose my Tom didn't see that there was anything in the jug, and filled it up with beer."

"I see. And I suppose that the fact that you thought Frank Thornton was inside the lock-up had nothing to do with the accident?"

The young woman showed signs of strong emotion.

"I've known Mr Frank all my life; he's always been kind to me. The vicarage is the only service I've ever had. I went there when I first went out, and I stayed there till I was married; and Mr Frank he's kissed me many and many a time — that was before I knew Mr Parsons — it was only a way he had!"

"Just so. And not a bad way either. Go on."

Mrs Parsons peeped at him from behind the cover of her handkerchief as if she were doubtful as to his meaning. She went on.

"And when I heard that he was at the mercy of those dreadful men, how could I tell that they'd be wanting beer and that my Tom wouldn't see that there was something in the jug!"

"Precisely; how could you? We cannot command the prophet's foresight. By the way, Mrs Parsons, I fancy that if you were to feel in that grey-haired gentleman's coat-tail pocket you'd find something which would relieve me of these ornaments with which he has loaded me."

The young woman, making no bones about doing what she was told, soon produced a bunch of queer-looking keys.

"I'm afraid that I myself am rather helpless. Do you think you could unlock me?"

"Are you perfectly certain that you're Mr Frank's friend?"

"Perfectly certain."

"And that he's safe?"

"Absolutely—that is, to the best of my knowledge and belief."

"Then I'll unlock you. I should think I did ought to be able to unlock a pair of handcuffs; I've not been a policeman's wife for nothing."

He thought of what Mr Parsons had said about having only

locked up one small boy in the whole of his official life, he wondered if she had acquired her knowledge by handcuffing her husband and then practising unlocking him. However that might have been, she showed herself deft enough at releasing him. Presently he was standing up, freed from his fetters.

"That's better; that's a great deal better. Mrs Parsons, you have—wittingly or not—rendered me a great service, and one which I shall never forget. Whatever may come of this night's adventure, neither Mr Parsons nor you shall suffer in the end."

"I do hope we sha'n't, especially Tom! he's as innocent as a babe unborn!"

"I give you my word, my dear woman, that neither he nor you shall suffer. Now there comes the question of clothes. I've had enough of this rig-out, although I've only had it on a few hours. If I go away in it I sha'n't be long at liberty. I've been looking at this gentleman who's lying across the chair. It strikes me that he's about my height and build; I might borrow his uniform and leave him mine in exchange."

Mrs Parsons, wiping her eyes, looked up at him with a sort of embryo smile.

"The idea of your going away dressed like a prison warder!"

"It's not a bad idea, is it? I think I'll proceed to put it into execution if you won't mind stepping outside just for half-a-minute."

Mrs Parsons stepped outside. The change was effected, and in a surprising short space of time. The fit was not all that it might have been, especially as regards the cap, but it served, and warders are not remarkable for the perfect fit of their uniform. He called to the lady without.

"Mrs Parsons!"

She reappeared, now more disposed to smile than to cry. He displayed himself before her twinkling eyes.

"You see, I've managed. Do you think it will do?"

"Well, I never did! I never should have known you!"

"Then that's all right. I think you mentioned—accidentally—that Frank Thornton kissed you—once."

She had the grace to blush.

"But that was before I met my Tom!"

"Exactly. As I am acting as Frank Thornton's substitute I feel that I should like to do what he would like to do. Good-night, Mrs Parsons."

He stooped and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Before she could remonstrate he was in the passage, unlocking and unbolting the door.

"A parting question: how shall I find the vicarage?"

"The vicarage? Turn to your left when you get outside, and keep straight on till you get to the end of the street, then it's the first house across the way. You can't help noticing it, because there's a lamp at the gate which is kept burning until the morning."

Without another word he opened the door, and the tall figure of a prison warder passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEMON KING

WHEN George Otway, in the disguise of a prison warder, having in mind Mrs Parsons' words as to the constantly burning lamp at the gate, had found the vicarage, he found himself confronted by still another difficulty. There, sure enough, was the light at the gate, but the house itself was in darkness. He could only guess at the time; but as the month was October, and the faintest gleam of light was beginning to show itself on the eastern horizon, he judged it to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of five o'clock. Since it was essential, if he wished to avoid recapture, that he should be out of the district before daylight, it was obviously desirous that he should gain admittance to the house with the least possible delay. If Mrs Thornton had acted on his instructions, and had had his bag brought from the station, he would be able to disencumber himself of his tell-tale uniform and start under as favourable conditions as possible—that is, if he could get at his bag. The difficulty lay in the if.

It would hardly do to rouse the house, in the ordinary way, by ringing and knocking. Not only might the wrong person come to the door, but more attention might be attracted than was at all desirable. He would have tossed a handful of gravel at Mrs Thornton's bedroom window, if he had known which was her window, but there again was the if. He had not the faintest notion in which part of the house she slept. It would never have done to startle the maidservant possibly half out of her senses by assaulting her bedroom window.

Possibly the safest method of effecting an entry would be by committing burglary. If he could only find a window which would let him through, by exercising care, and making as little noise as need be, it was quite possible that he might do all that he wanted to do, and be away again before anyone in the house had woke to the consciousness of his presence. He thought that he might take it for granted that the bag—if it

was anywhere—was in the room in which he had changed clothes with Frank Thornton on the previous evening. The point was: how was he to reach the room? From without he could not even decide upon its whereabouts; he could not remember from which side it had looked out, and, in the darkness all the windows seemed the same. If he was only inside he believed that he could find it on the instant.

Oh, for a convenient window!

The one which he had found open the night before was now locked, and—apparently—shuttered too. Ingress could not be had through that. Another promising window with large, wide sashes, and a sill raised only a couple of feet above the ground, was also secured on the inside by means of shutters; he could see them dimly through the pane, which was obscured neither by blind nor curtain. Probably the kitchen was on the other side. So far as he could make out, in the worse than uncertain light, the same conditions did not apply to the window which adjoined it—that was unshuttered. But it was a small one, the sill being perhaps five feet above the ground.

There was a knife in the warder's pocket. He tried the big blade first, to find that he could not reach the latch from where he stood. Prowling about in search of something by means of which he could raise himself his foot struck against what seemed to be a plant in a good-sized wooden box. Without hesitation he picked it up in his arms. Although its weight was as much as he could stagger under he managed to get it to the little window. Ruthlessly turning it over, by means of mounting on the exposed side he found he could reach what he wanted. The big blade proving too thick to slip between the sashes he substituted the smaller one. Presently, after a little gentle manipulation the hasp sprang back, with scarcely a sound. In another second the window was open. So small, however, was the aperture thus exposed that it was only with difficulty he could insert his bulky form. Indeed, he stuck quite fast, when he was half-way through, so that he was able to move neither back nor forward; and it was only after some distinctly painful manœuvres, and a considerable waste of time, that he was able to gain his end.

"It feels to me," he said to himself, when at last he found himself inside, "as if every bone in my body was crushed out of shape. If I had quite realised how tight that window was I doubt whether, even under the very pressing circum-

stances, I should have been disposed to tackle it; it's a wonder I didn't wedge myself in in such a fashion as to insure my being ignominiously trapped. Now, where am I? I've a notion it's the pantry. Where is the door? I'd give a five-pound note for a box of matches!"

When he had found the door, and was on the other side of it, he was not much better off. The darkness was Egyptian. He discovered that he had been mistaken in supposing that he would be any better off when he had effected an entrance: he had not the vaguest idea which way to turn, or what to do.

So bewildered was he by ignorance of his surroundings that it was with a sense of actual relief that he learnt, all at once, that he had aroused the house. He heard a door being unlocked overhead. A dim light from above served to show that he was in a sort of passage, with the staircase on his right. A quavering voice came over the balusters.

"Who's that downstairs?"

In spite of the quaver he recognised the voice: it was Mrs Thornton's. He answered, half beneath his breath:

"It is I: George Otway."

The information seemed to occasion the old lady surprise, not unmixed with apprehension.

"Mr Otway! Are you sure that you are Mr Otway?"

He moved towards the foot of the staircase, intending to give her ocular proof that he really was himself. So soon as she saw him she gave a stifled cry.

"You are not George Otway! you are one of those people from the prison back again."

He ascended the stairs, reassuring her as he ascended.

"I give you my word, Mrs Thornton, that I am George Otway: I have only once more changed my clothes. Instead of a felon I am now a warder. If you did as I asked you, and my bag is in the house, within five minutes I shall have changed again into my own proper self."

The old lady still seemed shaking with fright. Clinging to the balusters with one hand, a lighted candle held in the other, an old faded dressing-gown thrown over her night-dress, she stood blinking up at him as if he had been some dreadful visitant.

"I had your bag brought down, it's in Frank's room."

"And which is that?" She moved the candle towards the door. "How shall I get a light?"

"Here are some matches. You will find a candle in the room." As he was going she cried to him, with, in her tone, a note of sudden fear: "Mr Otway, what are you going to do?"

He turned to her, surprised by the change in her voice and bearing: her worn face was working as if she was suffering from some disease of the muscles.

"Why, Mrs Thornton, I'm going to do nothing; that is, nothing particular. I am only about to clothe myself in my own garments, and I assure you I shall be glad to do so. Then I will relieve you of my presence again as fast as I possibly can. My dear lady, why do you look at me like that, as if I were a ghost? Long ere this Frank should be in safety: everything is going well. I warned you that I might return at any moment, even as a thief in the night."

She shook her head feebly, as if her feelings were altogether beyond her powers of utterance.

"It isn't that," she muttered. "It isn't that."

When, within a very few minutes, he came out of Frank's room, clothed again in his own attire, she was still upon the landing. She greeted him with an odd remark, spoken with an appearance of something more than disquietude, as if she had been treating of some unholy thing.

"Mr Otway, they told me at the station that, in a first-class compartment on the train by which you had travelled, two men had been found—murdered."

She dropped her voice, as she uttered the last word, in a fashion which had about it something which was almost ominous.

He started back, taken wholly by surprise. He had not reckoned that the news would have travelled quite so quickly.

"Murdered, Mrs Thornton! But that's impossible! They certainly were not murdered."

Observing his discomposure she had apparently drawn from it her own conclusions, regarding him with accusatory eyes.

"I thought so! I thought so!" She repeated her words twice over. "It was not for Elsie's sake only that you came here! That Frank should be so indebted to you! My poor children! Go quickly, sir, before the avengers of blood are at hand, and may the Lord have mercy upon you, for, apparently, you have placed yourself beyond the reach of man's help."

They were not comfortable words to have ringing in his ears as he went out again into the silence and the darkness of the night; for it was yet dark, and the light on the horizon was still but the faintest glimmer. His plans were of the vaguest. The sudden alteration in Mrs Thornton's manner, the evident desire which she had shown to be rid of him, to be relieved of the contagion of his presence, had affected him so unpleasantly, that he had scarcely stayed to obtain from her explicit instructions as to the road by which he was to travel. So he started forth on his fresh journeying in a state of mental confusion and discomfort which were as unusual as they were unwelcome.

It was altogether beyond the range of possibility that Harvey and Rochambeau had been found murdered, none knew that better than he did. But was it possible that they had been found dead? He had done nothing which could have been responsible for bringing their careers to such a sudden termination; but, still, if they were dead he would be in a truly terrible position.

And that Elsie's mother should have imagined that he could have been guilty of such a crime! Should, indeed, seemingly have taken it for granted, that he had two men's blood upon his hands! The sting lay in that—that she esteemed it as even conceivable that he could be such a wretch! Elsie's mother!

He strode on through the night, his fists clenched, his lips pressed tightly together, saying hard things of himself to himself, not knowing where he was going, or seeming to care. How far he had gone, or how long he had been about it, he had no notion, when a sudden sound made him pause. A whirring, buzzing sound was coming towards him through the air.

"It's a motor," he decided.

It was yet at a considerable distance, only the perfect stillness which prevailed rendered it audible at all. Himself a motorist, acquainted with motorists' ways, his first thought was that it was some record-breaking gentleman, who was taking advantage of the deserted highways, and the absence of the police, to give his car its head. A brief period of listening, however, showed that that could hardly be the case. His trained ear enabled him to perceive that the car was not only not going fast; but that it was varying its pace

in a fashion which suggested eccentricity on the part of the motor or the chauffeur. It would give a forward whizz, which would continue for a second or two, to suddenly change to a snail-like crawl, which would give place, as suddenly, to another whizz, returning to a snail-like crawl, followed by a regular burst, for perhaps a dozen seconds, only to subside again into a more pronounced crawl than before. This erratic method of progression—as was shown by the varying volume of sound—was repeated over and over again.

"Either someone's trying experiments on lines of his own, or there's something wrong with the works. I believe he's coming my way. He is! What wouldn't I give for a ride upon his car! Just the thing I'm wanting. If he'd only give me a lift he might dash across country in any direction he chooses. Is the fellow talking to himself?"

He was certainly talking to someone, and at the top of his voice. Presently he began singing, too. After an interval of perhaps another couple of minutes two vivid white lights appeared upon his right, at a considerable distance from where he was standing.

"That shows how straight the road is; I should say that those lights must be the best part of a mile from where I am. What a row the fellow's making; he must be stark, staring mad. If so, he ought to be just the man for me."

Someone on the approaching motor was singing, at the top of a sufficiently loud voice, snatches from a surprising variety of popular songs, passing from grave to gay, from the severe to the ultra-frivolous, with an ease and rapidity which indicated —to say the least—a musical taste of an unusually cosmopolitan kind. It almost seemed as if he was adapting the pace of his car to the style of his song, crawling along to the stately cadences of "Nazareth," flying to the lively strains of "Keep off the Grass." As he neared Otway he was bellowing something in German which, if his rendering was the correct one, went with a positively irritating drawl, so slowly did his motor move—with the apparent intention of keeping time to the song, that it scarcely seemed to move at all. Otway hailed him when he was within a yard or two.

"Hollo! what might that song be with which you're favouring the stilly night? It's strange to me."

The vocalist stopped both his singing and his car, answering the inquiry as if it were the most natural thing in the world

that such a question should be addressed to him by a perfect stranger, in such a place, at such a time.

"That's a German students' song, in two-and-twenty verses, each verse has two-and-twenty lines, and each line has to be sung three times over. It's adapted to an all-night sitting, since it takes all night to sing it through. And as the air's of no account, and the words are meaningless, it doesn't matter what state you're in when you're singing it. Who are you? You look as if you were a gentleman, and you sound as if you're one."

Otway's tone, as he replied, was dry.

"It's very good of you to say so. I've been listening to you for a quarter of an hour, wondering what sort of jaunt you were out on."

"Oh, I'm riding to the devil; there's nothing like a motor for an excursion of the kind; and, at this time of the morning, what are you doing here listening to anything?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"The deuce you are. Then, if that's the sort of man I've met he ought to be fit company for a ride with me."

"Nothing would please me better. Where are you going?"

"To Southampton or to Dover, to Land's End or to John o'Groats, into the next hedge or ditch, it's all about the same to me."

"Then if that's the case a whizz to Southampton would exactly suit my taste."

"A whizz, you say? Then, by jingo! you shall have it. I'll show you what a 50-horse-power can do when the road is clear. Up you come!" As George Otway mounted to the vacant seat, the driver shouted, "Perkins!"

Although the tonneau to all appearances was empty, an answering voice came from the rear:

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you prepared for sudden death?"

"I hope I am, sir; I ought to be by now."

"What you ought to be, and what you are, are two different things, entirely. Don't be an ass! I'm going to see what this car can do. You know what that means, so you'd better hang on by your eyelids."

The voice came again, only more faintly than before, with, about it, something which suggested a sigh.

"Yes, sir."

The chauffeur explained to the puzzled Otway, his explanation, however, only serving to increase his puzzlement.

"That's Bob Perkins. He's supposed to be my driver, and he'd like to drive me, but I prefer to drive him, as, you'll observe, I'm about to do. He's a timid soul, with a rooted objection to seeing himself rushing to eternal smash. As I hate to have him fidgeting at my side, asking what's to become of his wife and children if I make a funeral of him—which obviously is a preposterous thing to ask—and I dislike thinking that he's studying the shape of my head from behind, considering which is the most promising spot to whack at, I make him stop, not on the seat, but under it. I've had it constructed specially for his accommodation, and I pay him double wages for stopping there. He's not in my way, and if there's a burst-up he comes in handy—that is, if there's anything left of him, which there generally seems to be. Although he's of a different opinion himself, the man appears to be unsmashable. Do you know anything about motors?"

"A little."

"Perhaps enough to know a good one when you see it; this you're on is a beauty. I call her My Queen, sir, My Queen, because she is my queen for the present, my very latest 50-horse-power queen. She's the best car in England, never mind what the other fellows say. I've won prizes on her for going up-hill and for going down, for stopping and starting, for steering and for all sorts of gymnastics, for speed and for endurance, for time and for distance. I've won obstacle races on her, I've performed every kind of feat with her which automobile ingenuity could suggest, and she's cost more money in fines than any car of her age in Great Britain."

"That's a comfortable reflection, at any rate."

"It is. I'm going for all the records, the championship in fines among the rest. It's my intention that every rural policeman—rural, mind: I bar the cities, I'm not a Juggernaut! throughout the length and breadth of England shall have told lies about me before I've finished. I don't know how many thousand of them there are, but it will take some doing. I mean that every one of them shall know me by sight, so that they can tell lies about me, even to their grandchildren in the days which are to come. I'm a striking figure; they won't need to see me twice in order to have my image impressed upon what they call their brains."

He was, as he said, indeed a striking figure: a huge man, judging from the way he towered over the by no means dwarf-like Otway on the seat at his side, possibly six feet five or six in height. He had a long red beard, as long almost as a woman's hair. As the car swept onward the wind drove it over his shoulder in a fashion which made its unwieldiness more obvious. A moustache of equally preposterous dimensions decorated his upper lip. Otway felt, as he eyed him, that he reminded him of nothing so much as the ogre in the Christmas pantomime. He seemed to enjoy the glances with which Otway was favouring him.

"You'd know me again, wouldn't you?"

"Among a million."

The huge man laughed.

"There's conviction in your tone; I've not a doubt you're right. They call me the Demon King, but whether it's because of my temper, or my morals, or my appearance, or a combination of the three, I never am quite sure. I played the Demon King in a children's pantomime which I had in my own house last year, played it without the slightest make-up. Everybody congratulated me on the way in which I looked the part."

"I can believe it, easily."

"I thought you would. You're the sort of companion I like to have when I'm riding to the devil. Is this whizz enough for you?"

"Just about. How fast are we going?"

"It depends on who is the timekeeper. The average rural policeman, with his twenty-five-shilling stop-watch in his hand, and his senses nowhere, would tell you a hundred-and-twenty miles an hour, and swear to it. I tell you about fifty, and you can bet on me. But if we do come to a down grade, and I don't put on the brake, or slow her, that rural policeman won't be such a liar after all."

They were flying on at such a pace that the mere pressure of the air against their mouths and faces made it difficult to speak. To make themselves audible they had to shout. The speed at which they were going—through the darkness!—rendered it impossible for them to say what kind of country it was through which they were touring. But the terrific bumping which they had to endure, occasionally almost jerking Otway off his seat, although he was clinging

to it with both hands, made it sufficiently plain that the road over which they were passing was not remarkable for the excellence of its surface.

The chauffeur called attention to the fact with a sudden yell:

"Nice easy going, these country roads."

Otway yelled back at him:

"You think so? The position of the bones in my body will be altered if this goes on long."

"You wait till we come to a nice stretch of unrolled flints; then your real enjoyment will begin."

Otway thought of the unfortunate Bob Perkins underneath the seat.

"Won't that man of yours be banged to bits?"

"A little banging does him good—calms his mind."

Otway was inwardly of opinion that it would calm his body too—that is, if, at the end of the journey, there was any of it left to calm. Suddenly they leaped round a corner almost at right angles, with a mad twist, which all but sent the car over on one side, and the two men off it on the other—what had happened to Bob Perkins one could only guess. It was some moments before Otway had recovered breath enough to shout:

"Is that the way in which you always go round corners?"

"Generally. I like her to take 'em in her stride; shows you how she answers to her helm. If you like—just to show you what she can do—I'll take you round a hundred-foot square at sixty miles an hour."

"Thank you; when I'm looking for trouble of that sort I'll let you know."

Suddenly the bumping increased; the wind assailed them with greater force; particles of dust came dashing against their faces, pricking them as if it had been powdered glass.

"Aren't we going faster?"

"It's down-hill—now's the time for your rural bobby with his watch."

"What hill is it?"

"Haven't a notion."

"What's at the bottom?—can't you see?—I can't; the dust and the wind together are about blinding me."

"Same here—don't worry—trust to fortune, that's my motto; sometimes I come to grief, and sometimes I don't—you've got to take your chances."

In spite of the speaker's reckless words Otway had sufficient command of his sense of perception to perceive that he not only kept a keen look-out, spotting bends and objects in the road which were quite invisible to his passenger, but, also, that he negotiated them with admirable skill. Again the pace slackened—although they were still being bumped and whirled through the air.

"We're at the bottom—now for the up-grade. I'll show you that she can go up as well as down."

"I hope you know the road."

"In a general sort of way—that is, I've been over it before, in broad daylight. Going at this rate, through the darkness, I'm almost as much a stranger on it as you can be. Hollo!—what's that? Some fool's left something lying on the road."

It seemed that some "fool" had. The car seemed to strike against some unseen object which caused her to bound, like a thing of life, into the air. Otway thought that, this time, they certainly were over. But in a fashion which seemed almost miraculous, the car, righting herself, went speeding on.

"That was a shaver!" admitted the driver.

Otway did not need to be told. He was beginning to wonder if, after all, he would not have been better off, if, refusing to take advantage of Mrs Parsons' good offices, he had stayed in her husband's lock-up. Nor were his doubts appreciably eased by what his companion said next.

"From where I met you I take it to be under forty miles to Southampton—perhaps thirty-seven. The sun gets up at twenty minutes past six; you shall be there in time to see him rise—if the machine lasts out. That will give us something under three quarters of an hour to do it in; you asked for a whizz, and you shall have one. If any rural policemen are taking an early walk abroad, they'll be of opinion that I'm exceeding the legal limits—those men are such scoundrels."

He was as good as his word, though there were times when Otway would rather he had not been. Just as the first rays of the sun were commencing to gild the sky the "Demon King," who had lately been coming along at an almost incredible rate of speed, stopped with a sudden jerk which caused his passenger to almost break both his neck and his spine.

"We've arrived!" he exclaimed, in a tone of triumph.

"Done it to a tick! I call that something like a whizz, don't you?"

Otway was so shaken, and so generally disorganised, that his speech was not so fluent as he would have desired.

"Rather—rather too much of a whizz for me."

"There you are!—I give you what you ask for—good measure, well pressed down!—and now you're not satisfied. Human nature all over! Well, here's Southampton; do you want me to take you to Plymouth?"

"Thank you.—I'm extremely obliged, but I won't put you to so much trouble, I think I'd rather descend right here."

"Then descend at once; or you'll have to do it while I'm moving."

Otway descended, as rapidly as his disjointed condition allowed. Scarcely had his feet touched the ground before the car was off; giving him no opportunity to thank its owner for the service he had rendered him. He watched it as it vanished—with a roar—in a cloud of dust.

"I wonder what's become of poor Bob Perkins?"

CHAPTER XXII

THE CIRCUS KING

HE himself felt half dazed. He was aching all over, almost as if he had been severely pummelled. He was covered from head to foot with dust; his mouth was parched by the dust which he had swallowed—he could hardly see out of his eyes. The first thing needful was clean water—and plenty of it. His own acquaintance with Southampton was of the slightest; the car appeared to have deposited him on the extreme confines of the town. By the time he had reached the heart of the city the world was stirring. He entered an inn in the High Street, accosting a dishevelled waiter.

"Can I have a bath at once? I've motored over with a gentleman who has gone on farther; I feel as if fresh water would do me good."

The waiter shook his head.

"Ah, them motor cars is dirty things! The bathroom's this way, sir."

By the time he had finished breakfast the morning paper was down from town. He was prepared for the announcement which confronted him directly the sheet was unfolded, though he had not expected that it would have been displayed in quite such startling fashion:

"JACOB GUNSTON AGAIN!

THE VAUXHALL JUNCTION MURDERER ON THE BRIGHTON LINE!

HE CONCEALS THE BODIES OF TWO MORE VICTIMS IN A LAVATORY CARRIAGE!"

There was the story with which he was already too well acquainted, told for all it was worth—and a little more. One would have supposed, from the use of the word "bodies," that the "two victims" had been found dead. Not a bit of it.

They had been found very much alive and kicking. Indeed, it was because of the noise they made that discovery had followed. The tale they had poured out to greedy ears had been distinctly of the coloured kind; still, Otway recognised that there was enough of truth in it to make it extremely desirable that he should keep, for a time, out of reach of the police. If his association with Frank Thornton's flight became known, as it probably would before long, then the desirability of such a proceeding would become appreciably increased: the law looks with revengeful feelings on those who help a felon to escape.

Not the least awkward feature of the matter, from his point of view, lay in the fact that the paper contained a complete list of the numbers of Ebenezer Pullen's bank-notes; supplied by Mr Rochambeau from the list contained in his "father's" note-book. As Pullen's legacy stood, to all intents and purposes, for all he had in the world this was awkward. Before long the whole world would be on the lookout for those bank-notes. If he were not detained in the act of attempting to cash one it would still serve as a clue which would at once put the pursuers on his heels.

So, at a single sweep, his whole fortune became but so much waste-paper. Apart from Pullen's notes he possessed but six pounds four shillings and ninepence.

As he was considering this uncomfortable fact, the waiter began to clear away the breakfast things. He was a friendly creature, with a tendency to be loquacious. As he piled the various articles on his tray he said, in a casual sort of fashion:

"I see that there Jacob Gunston's been at his tricks again."

Otway started; he remembered with a sensation of emphatic relief, that he had shaved his face, dyed his hair, stained his cheeks with Frank Thornton's brown shoe polish, changed his clothes. He certainly did not now resemble—at least, to the casual eye—the description given of him in the paper. Therefore the air of indifference with which he replied to the waiter was not an affair of outside show only.

"So I see."

"A pretty sort, he is. I should like to have the handling of him. A pity men like him can't be drowned while they're babies. But the police will have him in the end, you'll see."

Although he did not say so, George Otway hoped that he should not see, just at present.

That night he was on the steamer which was bound to Havre. Feeling strongly that it would be just as well if he was out of England for a while, since his funds would not permit of his going far away, it occurred to him that a short sojourn in France might give him an opportunity of considering the situation, in comparative safety and seclusion. Besides, six pounds might perhaps be made to go farther in France than in England.

The boat left the South-Western Railway Company's wharf at midnight. Otway enjoyed a last pipe on deck as she steamed down Southampton Water. A burly man, dressed in a lurid suit of check tweeds, came up to him. He had a big cigar between his lips.

"Fine night," he observed.

Otway admitted that it was. As the man turned towards him the air was scented with whiskey. Although he was certainly not drunk; equally certainly he had taken sufficient to make him disposed to be confidential with a perfect stranger.

"This is the fiftieth time I've come across this way; the fiftieth time to-night, it is."

"Is that so? You should know it pretty well."

"I should; and I do. There's few ways I don't know, if it comes to that; few ways from anywhere to anywhere. I've done 'em all. I'm the Circus King."

Otway smiled; this was the second king he had met within the last four-and-twenty hours. The first had been the Demon King; this, it seemed, was a king of another genus. The stranger continued, oblivious of the other's smile:

"Yes, I'm the Circus King, that's who I am: Brown, the Circus King."

Otway began to understand.

"I have heard of you, and of your circus, Mr Brown."

"That's nothing. Most people have. It's only fools who haven't. Not that my name is Brown. The name that I've a right to is FitzGerald Sanderson Giffard. Most men, with a name like that of their very own, would have stuck it on the bills. But I said, 'No; we've had too much of the aristocracy on the bills already. I'll be Brown.' So I am Brown: Brown, the Circus King."

He was silent, as if he wished this solemn fact to permeate the other's intelligence by degrees. Then he went on:

"My show's at Rouen; not the greatest show on earth: I don't go in for bunkum of that kind. My show's the Hippodrome of the New Century, that's what my show is, neither more nor less. Looks well in French. I've been over the way in search of talent, and I haven't found it."

"That's unfortunate."

"It's worse—it's awkward—damn awkward. I've got a programme a couple of foot long. On the bottom of it's printed 'The Management reserve the right of altering this programme should occasion require.' And occasion does require, you bet, all the time. Half of the names on it are dummies, only about six inches of it's genuine turns. Audiences don't like it, not even French ones." Otway deemed it more than possible; but did not say so. The Circus King was looking him up and down with eyes which, though they were more than a little bloodshot, still were keen enough. "You're not in the profession yourself, I suppose? No offence! but there's something about your cut which would take the women's fancy if they saw you in the ring; and I'm so pushed for talent, that, rather than go back empty-handed, I'd ask King Solomon in all his glory if he was any hand at dancing tubs. If you're looking out for an opportunity to distinguish yourself, here's the chance of a lifetime."

Otway was tickled. He was quick to see that, if the man was serious, here was an opportunity, indeed; though hardly the sort of opportunity the speaker painted. The police would scarcely look for him in a circus ring; and the change out of his original six pounds would not go far even in France.

"I've never tried my hand at that sort of thing; I'm afraid I should be of no use to you at all."

The Circus King seemed to be of a different opinion.

"You're the very man I'm looking for; the very man. Shake!"

He held out a grimy palm.

"Before I shake I should like to know what I'm shaking about. If I've any talent, in your sense, candidly, I've not the faintest shadow of a notion in what direction it lies."

"Can you shoot?"

"I have shot."

"You know one end of a gun from another?"

"I certainly do know that."

He did not mention that few men were his equals with

either a shot gun or a rifle ; and that with a revolver he could hold his own. Nor did the Circus King appear to consider it of the least importance that his new acquaintance should lay claim to proficiency of any sort or kind.

"Then I tell you what you shall be, you shall be Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist, the Marksman of the Plains. I'll have your life's story on a little special note in the programme. Pity you haven't only got one eye!"

"Thank you ; I'm just as well contented with two."

"You wouldn't put a patch over one of them?"

"What's the notion?"

"The public have a fancy for a one-eyed marksman. I have thought, more than once, of trying one who was stone blind ; but I'm not quite sure how it would work. It wouldn't make any difference to their shooting if they were all stone blind, I do know that."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

"My dear boy, I've got a piano that is a piano. You take away the front, there's a metal disc attached to each wire, you aim at the discs—with a repeating rifle—the notes are struck, and so you fire out a tune ; in France it's the 'Marseillaise,' in England it's 'God Save the King,' in Ireland it's 'The Wearin' o' the Green—' always cater for the public taste. Wonderful effect on an audience that act has."

"But I could no more fire out a tune—as you put it—than you could fly."

"You say you know one end of a gun from the other."

"Yes ; but that's one thing——"

"That's the thing. All you've got to do is to point the barrel right ahead—if you can do it standing on your head all the better, but that's not indispensable—and pull the trigger. You leave the rest to me. Don't you worry yourself about trifles. Amazing what you can do in the shooting way, with a man who knows one end of a gun from the other. Now, I've got an electric device. You fire at the ivory buttons. Every time you hit one it illuminates a letter, until you've got 'Vive la France' in flaring twenty-four-inch capitals. I tell you that takes 'em!"

"But don't you ever get found out?"

"Not if a man acts on the square, and is an honest gentleman. Of course there are scabs about. My last marksman, he was one. He had a little difference with one

of the members of my company, so he takes it out of me! Nice game that was. One night he was firing out the 'Marseillaise,' the tune was going strong, but I found that, instead of cheering like mad, the people were holding their sides with laughter. Then I saw that that black-hearted scoundrel instead of pointing the muzzle of his weapon at the piano, like a man, was aiming it all over the shop. It didn't matter where he aimed, every time he pulled the trigger a note was sounded: of course that gave away the show. The audience didn't like it. But I don't suppose you'd play me a trick like that."

"I think I may safely undertake to say that I wouldn't do that."

"Then, shake!"

Still with some appearance of doubt Otway yielded his hand to the other, and "shook," but there was evidently no doubt whatever in the mind of the Circus King.

"My dear boy, you're Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist, the Marksman of the Plains, and don't you forget it. Later, I shouldn't be surprised if we rigged up another act for you, most of my crowd do double turns. Let me see—you might be the Brawny Bedouin; the Big Bandit of Bokhara; the Latest Strong Man of the West, and do the Samson and Delilah business—breaking ropes, and chains, and lifting horses and carts with your teeth, and that sort of thing."

"I suppose that also would be arranged."

The Circus king closed his left eye in a portentous wink.

"My dear boy, in my place everything's arranged: it's all done on a system: nothing's left to chance. I've got all the necessary apparatus—magnificent fit-up! The only thing that's wanted in a show like mine is talent."

They talked till the steamer was far out at sea. On reaching Havre they went on together, by train, to Rouen. There Mr Brown introduced him to a large canvas tent, which, according to a huge legend which ran nearly half-way round it, was

"L'Hippodrome Du Siècle Nouveau."

On entering, they were greeted by a young lady in fleshings.

"This," explained the Circus King, "is Madeleine, Nature's Miracle; the Greatest Bender the World has ever seen—and

likewise Pauline Petroski, the Russian Lady Bare-Backed Rider of the Cossack Steppes—Sallie, my dear, this is our new Bull's Eye."

As the young lady looked up at him with laughing black eyes George Otway was disposed to think that he was entering on the queerest adventure of all.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BENDER

WITHIN ten minutes of his being introduced to her, George Otway, in his new and most surprising character of Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist, the Marksman of the Plains, was talking to the plump young lady who was at once Madeleine, Nature's Miracle, the Greatest Bender the World has ever seen, and Pauline Petroski, the Russian Lady Bare-Backed Rider of the Steppes, as if he had known her for ten years.

"I hardly know how to address you, are you known to your friends as Miss Madeleine, or as Miss Petroski?"

She laughed.

"I'm Sallie Price, everybody calls me Sallie. And who are you?"

"You heard Mr Brown introduce me as Bull's Eye, the——"

She cut him short.

"Yes, I know; that may do for the ring, but what's your name outside it?"

He hesitated, then gave the name by which he had been known since he boarded the *Cormorant*.

"I am John Lennard."

"Oh, you are John Lennard; I see." There was a twinkle in the speaker's eyes which made him wonder what she saw; he perceived that this was a shrewd young woman. "Are you real?"

"I believe so, I have had no reason to suppose that I wasn't. If you pinched me hard enough I should feel bound to scream."

"I daresay; but, I mean, are you a real marksman? Or are you one of Brown's sort, who knows one end of a gun from the other?"

He seemed, for a moment or two, to be in doubt as to what he should reply.

"Well, I shouldn't care to back myself to fire out a tune on

a piano with a rifle; which feat, I understand, according to the bills, is one in which I am supposed to be peculiarly proficient. You, I take it, are all that the advertisements represent you to be."

"At any rate, I'm not a fraud. I suppose there's hankey-pankey everywhere; but there's a bit too much of it about Brown's show for this child. I can ride. I was on a horse as soon as I was out of long clothes, but that's not my special line of business, I don't pretend it is. There's heaps can beat me at that game. But Brown's never satisfied with your doing one thing well; if he could he'd make you do the whole bag of tricks single-handed. I'm a bender, that's what I am; and if there's anyone can beat me at bending I don't know who it is. If I could only find a backer I'd be willing to match myself against anyone who's going—each side to name half-a-dozen tricks, and each trick to score one point. It isn't everybody who can do this: it's a new thing I am going to try to-night. I was practising it just before you came."

Miss Price, the freedom of her limbs in no way trammelled by the tights which displayed her well-shaped figure to such advantage, suddenly flung herself forward on to the palms of her hands, so that, her body supported by her rigid arms, she was, all at once, upside down, with her feet in the air. She remained, quite motionless, in that position, for perhaps a dozen seconds, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that a lady should be completely at her ease when topsy-turvy. Then, very slowly, she twisted her right leg seemingly half round in its socket, lowering it down her back till her foot embraced her neck. When the operation was completed she repeated it with the left leg, lowering it, however, down the front of her, instead of the back; so that one leg was on either side of her body. Then, with the same uncomfortable slowness, she raised her left hand from the ground, stretching it out till it clasped her right knee; leaving her supported on one hand only. Lowering herself, till her whole distorted body was balanced on the crown of her head, she gripped her left knee with her right hand; and, bending her neck till one wondered when the moment would come that it would snap, commenced to turn a series of grotesque, dreadful somersaults across the ring. Otway felt that he was expected to applaud; but the exhibition was, to his mind, such an unpleasant one that it was all he could do to keep himself from interrupting the performance.

When she had wriggled herself a certain distance, returning in the same manner as she had gone, she proceeded, as it were, to unfasten herself; a process which evidently required infinite care, as well as considerable time. At last she was again upside down upon her hands; then sprang lightly back upon her feet. Her face was geranium scarlet, the blood-vessels seemed bursting through her skin, the eyes starting from her head; and she was gasping for breath, but still she smiled, with what was unmistakably an air of triumphant satisfaction.

"Well," she demanded, seeing that Otway still kept silent, "what do you think of that?"

He would have been sorry to have been compelled to say what he thought, so he temporised.

"Wonderful! wonderful! Isn't—isn't it rather painful?"

"It is and it isn't. If you keep yourself just so it's not so bad; but if you let yourself get a bit rusty, my crikey; it gives you beans. When you're putting yourself back the joints won't go into their proper places, and—oh, sometimes I could shriek! It would give the audience a shake-up if you were to let yourself go; but it would be the end of you so far as the profession was concerned. I have fainted, sometimes you can't help it, but I've always managed to keep right till I was straightened out again. If you were to go off while you were all knotted up, goodness knows what would become of you." She shuddered, as if the prospect were too dreadful even for her to contemplate. "The great thing is to be always practising; a dozen times a day, if you can; never lose a chance. Extraordinary how soon your joints get rusty. Why, I've travelled all the way from Marseilles to Nice in a lover's knot; that's one of my great specialties, a lover's knot. Of course, I had the carriage all to myself; but if anyone had happened to look through the window it would have been a bit of all right!"

Otway tried to picture to himself this distinctly prepossessing looking damsel traversing that lonely stretch of country in—what horrible dislocation of shapely limbs would result—of all things in the world—in a lover's knot?

A man, who he had been conscious had been watching them for the last two or three moments, with arms folded across a sufficiently broad chest, advanced to where they were standing. Otway, anticipating a friendly greeting, for the

spirit of the place seemed to be one of hail-fellow-well-met, was surprised by the brusque fashion in which the newcomer addressed him.

"Well, my fine cove, who might you happen to be?"

The question was asked in a tone of voice which was scarcely meant to be friendly. Otway looked the questioner up and down. Although not tall, he was broad out of all proportion to his height; his chest measurement would not have discredited a giant. Without being in any way gross, he would not improbably have turned the scale at seventeen stone. The expression of his face, which was naturally surly, was not improved by the fact that he appeared to have had his nose broken at some period of his life; and afterwards set, possibly by some amateur chirurgeon, a little out of the straight. Otway returned his stare, with a smile.

"Without intending the least discourtesy, might I turn your question round, and ask who you might happen to be?"

The fashion in which his inquiry had been received seemed to take the broad-chested man slightly aback. He glowered in silence, as if at a loss for words; when they came they certainly did not breathe a more amicable spirit.

"I'll tell you who I am, and pretty soon, if you're very anxious to know; and I'll tell you something else as well: this young lady's my property. I don't allow no one to go fooling about with her; so just you take the tip from me. You sheer off; or you'll find I'll make you."

However, on this occasion he "sheered off" himself. While Otway, not a little amused by this sudden explanation of the gentleman's unfriendly attitude, was about to assure him that nothing could be further from his mind than any desire to "fool about" with Miss Sallie Price, he turned on his heels, and, with his arms still folded on his capacious chest, strolled leisurely, and with dignity, to the side of the ring. Otway, watching him as he went, inquired of the lady who he was. Her reply was a little startling.

"He's the Dandison Brothers."

"The Dandison Brothers? Pardon me; but, although the Hippodrome of the New Century is, beyond all doubt, an abode of the marvellous, I don't quite see how one single gentleman can be brothers."

"They call him the Dandison Brothers; it's because he fancies that he's bigger than all the rest of them put together.

He's their representative, besides; acts as their agent. So far as their show's concerned, he's their pillar."

"Their pillar? But, who—or what—are the Dandison Brothers?"

"Acrobats; used to be in the first flight; but that was years ago, when the original Dandisons were kids. Their business was all new then; but now it's been copied all over the place. And, then, they've quarrelled among themselves, and each one's started a troupe of his own, so that now I don't know how many lots of Dandison Brothers there are about. But I believe these are the original lot—at least, what's left of them. They wouldn't come here because Brown couldn't afford to pay their terms—they used to draw their hundred and twenty pound a week—well, if it wasn't for me."

"I understand: they come because you're here."

"Well, it isn't them; it's him. He's a bad-tempered brute. If they don't let him have his own way he's nasty, and he can be nasty if he likes. He will be where I am; so just for the sake of peace, they let him have his own way, and here they are."

"He must be very fond of you."

"He says he is."

"And you, aren't you very fond of him?"

There was something in the young lady's manner which prompted the question.

"Me! fond of him? I wouldn't touch him with a pair of tongs if I could help it. He knows that; he ought to, I've told him often enough. He want's me to marry him; he's asked me, well, often he's asked me over a dozen times in a day, so I lay he's asked me a good deal over a thousand times. He comes up, quite casual like, it might be where we are this minute, and he says, perhaps at the top of his voice, looking as if he had a bad attack of indigestion, which is what I believe he suffers from, 'Now Sallie Price, I want you to be my wife! Do you hear, I want you to be my wife!' Sometimes I say nothing; sometimes I let him have a piece of my mind; sometimes I throw something at him. It's all the same, it makes no difference to him; he keeps on asking me. And then if he sees anyone treating me with decent civility he starts hammering them. If you don't look out he'll be wanting to knock your head off before very long."

"I trust that, if occasion arises, I may be able to meet

all his requirements in that direction; in the meantime, let him want. He seems to be an all-round pleasant kind of individual."

"The plain truth is we can none of us abide him; I know that he makes my life a regular misery, always fighting with everybody I like; then you don't want to have a man you abominate always worrying you to marry him, sometimes right out in the middle of the street. The troupe would soon send him packing if it weren't that he's such a first-rate pillar; and, as things are, a good pillar isn't such an easy thing to get."

"What do you mean by a pillar?"

"Well, you see—he stands on the ground, and two men stand on his shoulders, and four men on theirs, and two on theirs, and one on top, nine of them altogether—and he stands up under the lot. It isn't every one can do it."

"So I should imagine."

"Keeps as steady as a rock he does, never flinches; they do say he's the finest pillar in the profession."

At this juncture the Circus King, the great Brown himself, advanced towards them from one side of the ring, with the apparent intention of encountering a lady who approached them from the other. This lady was, with the possible exception of the Mother of Caracas, the very largest lady, as regards build, George Otway had ever seen; a fact which, as in the case of that distinguished personage, was accentuated by the dress she wore. This lady was clad in a silk dress of a peculiarly vivid blue, cut low at the neck, with short sleeves, and a long train which trailed in the dirt behind her. It was true that it was old and dirty, and so torn and worn that here and there it was a wilderness of darns, but, still, such a costume, in such a place, at such an hour! Otway, amazed at the spectacle she presented, inquired of Miss Price who the lady was.

"It's Mrs Brown."

"Brown?—Not his wife?"

Miss Price nodded.

"She has been shown as a fat woman."

"Has she ever been shown as anything else?"

"Now she's the Dancing Walrus; the Elephantine Equilibrist; the Most Ponderous Lady Who Ever Danced on a Slack Wire. It says on the programme that she weighs five-and-thirty stone."

"Even if you take ten stone off! on the slack wire! such a figure! is it possible?"

"Why, she's our A1 turn! When she's getting up everybody splits their sides with laughing. And when she's on!—of course she can't do much, but everybody's so surprised to see her do anything at all that they shout themselves hoarse. Take care; here she is."

CHAPTER XXIV

BULL'S EYE

THE Circus King and his truly massive other half had come within a few feet of each other. The lady spoke, in a deep, resonant voice, which somehow recalled the roar of a bassoon.

"So, Mr Brown, you're back again."

"I am, my dear, and glad to see your sweet face. How's business?"

"Bad—awful—disgusting."

Each word represented a lower note, the last seemed to come from the neighbourhood of the lady's boots.

"That's unpleasant news."

"It's so bad that it doesn't deserve to be called business at all. If I were to tell you what amount of money was in the house last night you'd shudder. But what can you expect? There's nothing and no one to attract the public."

"There's you, my dear. If there's a greater attraction going than you are I should like to know who and what it is. If the public don't flock in their thousands to see you, then it's because the public taste is bad, that's all. You can't get behind that, my dear."

"I'm not what I was. I lost three pounds last week."

Otway thought that if she had lost thirty it would have been a good thing, but it seemed that opinions differed.

"That is sad news, very sad. That'll never do, never! You must eat more."

"I'm always eating as it is. I eat so much that it gives me indigestion. Then I can't sleep o' nights."

"Dear me! worse and worse! Sound sleep and fattening food are both things you must have plenty of if you want to keep up a figure like yours. And no exercise, my love, no exercise. We can't have you fading away."

The idea of that marvel of ponderosity being in any danger of fading away seemed to be so remote as not to be worth

consideration, yet, to judge from the serious expression on the Circus King's countenance, he might have been watching her dwindling before his eyes. The lady diverted the conversation into a less personal channel.

"Well, Mr Brown, what talent have you brought with you from the other side?"

The Circus King began to rub a horny hand across his bristly chin, the worried look on his face becoming distinctly more marked.

"I've not had a great catch, my lamb, not a great catch. This," he extended his arm towards Otway with what that gentleman was convinced was a twitching of his eyelid, "is all the talent I've succeeded in procuring."

"This!" The word was uttered with an emphasis, and accompanied by a look, which hardly conveyed a compliment. "My goodness! And pray, sir, who might you be?"

George Otway felt that, under the circumstances, the question was rather an awkward one to answer.

"I'm"——he began, but when he had got so far the Circus King answered for him.

"This, my love, is Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist, the Marksman of the Plains."

On receiving this information the lady's manner, and language, became even more unflattering than before.

"That old fraud! I should have thought, Mr Brown, that after your last experience you would have had enough of it."

"My dear, you are unreasonable, most unreasonable! One of the finest acts at present before the public, an absolute money magnet, absolute! Think of the magnificent apparatus! what it cost me! you wouldn't have it wasted! why I paid eleven pound ten for the piano alone!"

"You'll pay more for it before you've done, if you don't take care."

"You don't understand, my pet, you really do not understand. We are now dealing with a gentleman, twenty-two carat, hall-marked, a man in whom I have the most implicit confidence. He wouldn't give the show away for any amount of money. I'm sure of it, perfectly certain."

Considering the extent of their acquaintance George Otway felt that the Circus King was a courageous man. His wife seemed to be of a less sanguine disposition.

"That's all very well, but I know better. When they've once got their knife inside you they can't resist a chance of giving a twist to the handle, they're all the same." She addressed the new Bull's Eye again in a somewhat depreciatory strain. "Is there nothing else you can do, sir, except shoot nothing out of a gun and hit nothing with it?"

"Frankly, madam, while I have been enjoying the pleasure of Miss Price's conversation I have been thinking things over, and have recalled one or two matters, at which I used to be something of a hand, which might be of service in such an establishment as this."

"What's one of them?"

"I can both fence and box a little."

The Circus King shook his head.

"Fencing's no good, it don't attract the sort of public we cater for. And as for boxing, I don't know how that would do over here. In a scrap Frenchmen don't use their hands much, they're better with their feet—the savate, you know. Would it be a comic act?"

"How do you mean, a comic act?"

"Can you really fight, or can you only play the fool?"

Otway laughed.

"You put it frankly. I can only say that I used to be able to use my hands."

"Did you? then what's your idea? Call on someone in the audience to come into the ring and have a couple of rounds with you?"

"In that case I might easily meet more than my match."

"What do you think? Of course we should arrange that, we're not mugs. We should put our own man among the audience, and you'd fight him. But, before we go any further, what I want to know is——" The Circus King paused to tilt his hat back, and scratch his head. "You see, this is a sort of thing in which you'll have to do something, and I want to know what you can do. I've got gloves, isn't there somehow you can show us what you can do with them?"

"If you like it, I'll have a turn with you."

"With me!" The Circus King drew back; to assume an air of greater dignity. "I'd have you to understand, sir, that, as Brown the Circus King, it's out of the question that I should box with anything but first-rate quality."

"I'll try to show you as much quality as I can."

The Circus King waved his hand in the air, apparently to wave away the notion.

"No, sir, no! As the proprietor of this establishment I tell you that it's out of the question. It's nonsense, sir, nonsense."

His wife seemed to be of a different opinion.

"I don't see why it's nonsense, Mr Brown: why can't you box the man? You needn't kill him; and I daresay he won't quite kill you."

Otway laughed again.

"I certainly undertake that there shall be no killing on my side."

But the Circus King was not to be persuaded.

"My sweet, I see your idea, and I could trust myself not to do this gentleman an injury, but, in my position, it's out of the question that I should seem to attempt to strike a member of my company, quite. So let us have no more about it. But in an establishment of this character, there ought to be someone who is able to do what is required. Ah, there's Tebb! I understand, Sam Tebb, that you have the reputation of being a fighting man. Perhaps you wouldn't mind obliging this gentleman—as a favour."

Sam Tebb proved to be the pillar of the Dandison Brothers. He had been sitting on the side of the ring, observing the proceedings with an air which did not suggest the warmest approval. Now he slouched towards the little group in the centre; demanding, as he did so:

"What's the game?"

The Circus King explained.

"Our friend here, Sam—the latest acquisition to our list of unrivalled attractions,—proposes to enliven our programme by an exhibition of artistic boxing. In order to furnish the act with a title which shall at once embellish and describe it, it seems necessary that we should have a little rehearsal, so perhaps you wouldn't mind putting on the gloves with him; say, for a couple of minutes."

"Don't blame me if I hurt him; that's all."

"We sha'n't blame you, Sam, not in the least! not in the least!"

Otway added his disclaimer to the Circus King's.

"I won't blame you, Mr Tebb; indeed, I shall be obliged by your putting yourself to so much trouble."

Sam Tebb grinned; not pleasantly.

"No trouble—it never is any trouble for me to fight anyone—it's a direction in which I'm always willing to oblige."

"Jim," cried the Circus King, hastily, as if fearful Tebb's words and manner should have too much effect on the latest acquisition, calling to a nondescript individual who was loitering on the other side of the ring. "Go and fetch a couple of pairs of boxing gloves, and look sharp about it—you'll find 'em in the property tent!"

While the gloves were being fetched the two gentlemen divested themselves of their coats and waistcoats; Miss Price taking advantage of an opportunity which offered to whisper in Otway's ears:

"Take care of him; he's a dangerous man; he's fought for money."

"Has he? Then this time he's going to fight for fun."

Miss Price looked at him as if she thought that he was treating the matter more lightly than he ought to; but, perhaps noticing that her too-persistent wooer was observing her with malignant eyes, and fearful lest he should make Otway suffer for any attentions which she might pay him, she withdrew from Otway's immediate neighbourhood. While they were still waiting for the arrival of the gloves quite a number of persons put in an appearance in or about the ring. Among them Otway noticed eight men who stood close together; and who, although they were outside the ring, seemed to take a lively interest in what was going on. He was afterwards to learn that they were the remaining members of the Dandison Brothers' troupe.

"We sha'n't want chairs, or seconds, or any of that kind of thing, I suppose?" inquired the Circus King; as if he rather hoped they would.

If such was the case his hopes were damped by Mr Tebb.

"Not we, we sha'n't want anything." Then he added, with what seemed to be his characteristic grin: "Except, maybe, a bit of soft ground for one of us to fall on."

The Circus King seemed anxious lest the point of this liittle witticism should be misapprehended.

"Of course, Sam, you understand that this is just a little friendly set-to—a mere matter of form—simply to serve the object I have described to you."

"I understand," said Sam, and his tone was grim.

The gloves were brought; the men in position. The more

George Otway surveyed Mr Tebb the more conscious he became that he had the build of a fighting man. It seemed possible that the "exhibition of artistic boxing" might be, to an uncomfortable extent, on one side only. He was aware, indeed, that such was the general anticipation: that the spectators quite expected to see him knocked out as soon as the fun began. They knew Sam Tebb, and the sledge-hammer force which was behind his blows; they regarded Otway with the half-amused contempt with which the average human is apt to regard the man of whom he knows nothing.

That feeling vanished before the "little rehearsal" had continued ten seconds, it needed less time even than that to perceive that the new-comer had not spoken vainly when he claimed to be able to use his hands. Tebb's methods were those of a man who counts his antagonist as quite unworthy of his serious consideration; his idea seemed to be that, if he chose, he could make an end of his opponent with a single blow. He tried to get that blow home at once, leaping at him as soon as the word was given, feinting with his left, intending to do the real business with his right.

But it was just those tactics which Otway had foreseen. His rapid survey of Mr Tebb had led him to the conclusion that, however fit he might be as a pillar, from a pugilist's point of view he was altogether out of condition. Not only so; he was inclined to suspect that, as a fighter, his best days were over; that he was in the state which Miss Price so much feared, one of rustiness; that if he met a man who really could extend him he would not last long. He knew himself to be as hard as nails; after his experiences of the last few months it would have been strange if he had not been. Let Tebb try to force the pace if he chose, he had only to keep him off—he would soon tire.

Still, the force with which he had come at him took him a little aback. He, himself, had merely proposed to show that he was not a novice with the gloves, so that the Circus King might know that he was not dealing with a perfect duffer. He had never meant real business. The ferocious intention Tebb displayed amazed him. Had one of those blows got home there would have been an end of him upon the spot. But they did not get home. He slipped aside as Tebb came blindly on, landing him slightly on the cheek as he went by. It was but a touch, but it seemed both to surprise and anger

Mr Tebb. Twisting round with unexpected agility, ducking, he got in a swinging left-hander on the other's ribs. Otway staggered, recovering himself just as he seemed bound to fall. The blow taught him caution: during the remainder of the round he took care that nothing else got home.

At the conclusion of the round the Circus King softly clapped his hands.

"Bravo, sir!—well done! You can use 'em. I shouldn't be surprised if the act tickled the Frenchmen after all. We'll call it A Lesson in the Art of Self-Defence taught by one of England's Champion Boxers."

"Self-defence!" growled Tebb. "You call that self-defence! It's the first time I ever heard running away called self-defence. You get him to stand up like a man, just as if he was inside a ten-foot ring, he'll be dead before the round's half through. Him one of England's champion boxers! Go on!" He spoke to Otway, with a grin. "Have you had about enough, or would you like a little bit more?"

"Thank you, Mr Tebb, it's very good of you; I don't think I should mind a little bit more."

Certain of the spectators laughed; his light-hearted bearing was in such marked contrast to the other's surliness. Besides, the man was unmistakably no cur. Their merriment was not approved of by Mr Tebb.

"All right," he grumbled. "You wait a bit, and I'll give you something to laugh at, and him, too; only let him stop jigging about, as if he was a blooming ballet-dancer."

Otway inwardly resolved that this time he would see what could be done by sticking to his ground, within reason; having a sort of vague idea that he might actually be able to teach Mr Tebb a lesson. He had noticed that he was what pugilists of a certain school call "very clever with his head"; dodging it swiftly up and down, and from side to side, to avoid the blows which were aimed at it. George Otway had once been taught a trick which was sometimes effective with fighters of that sort; he proposed, if opportunity offered, to put it into execution.

For a while, Otway acting on his determination to keep his ground as much as possible, there were some really smart exchanges; each man showing an indifference to punishment which warmed the spectators to applause. More than once Tebb got in a hot one; though he did not by any means have

all the fun to himself: Otway, while waiting for the chance he hoped for, managing to get in one or two smart taps, which had the apparent effect of making the other half beside himself with rage. This was just what he desired, since it was necessary that his antagonist should lose his judgment if his manœuvre was to succeed.

On came Tebb, more bent than ever on getting in a knock-out blow. For a second or two the men were so close together that they had hardly room for hitting; it being part of Tebb's tactics, while his arms were working like piston rods, to actually lean his face against the other's chest so that he could not get at it. This was Otway's chance. Leaning right forward, he reached over Tebb's head, and struck him on the back of the neck, at the same time springing smartly backward. Over went Sam on to his face; and there he lay. There were shouts of applause from the spectators, the voice of the Circus King being specially conspicuous.

"Bravo, sir!" he exclaimed. "Serve him right!"

If Sam Tebb chose to lie still it was possibly because he was of opinion that a little repose might do him good; it was evidently not because he had been deprived of consciousness: as the comment which he made, as he scrambled to his feet, on the proprietor's outspoken remark, plainly showed.

"Serve me right, did it? Very good. I'll remember that; and you'll find I've got a good memory." He turned to Otway. "That wasn't a fair blow; that was a coward's blow, that was. I'll kill you for it before I've done with you."

Sam Tebb was evidently ready to resume the proceedings at once. The proprietor interposed.

"Now, Tebb, no nonsense! We've had enough of it! That'll do! We just wanted to see if our friend here could use his hands, and you went for him as if you were fighting for your life. I tell you that what you got serves you right."

"Serves me right, does it? I'll serve you right for a row of pins, talking to me like that, an old fraud like you!"

The remaining eight Dandison Brothers, who had come into the ring some time ago, gathered round their irate and wrong-headed pillar.

"Don't be a bigger fool, Sam, than you can help. What did you want to go for the chap for as if you wanted to murder him? It was a good thing for him that he did down you, and maybe a good thing for you, too."

"That's your opinion, is it? I don't care that for none of you." He had removed the gloves from his hands, and now tossed them from him with a gesture which was meant to be significant. "Well, Mr American Champion Shootist—bah! fancy your working that old swindle!" He turned his head to express his disgust by spitting on the ground. "In that lesson on the art of self-defence, which I'm told you're going to treat us to, would you like to have me for a pupil? You might down me again; and, on the other hand, you mightn't,"

"I'm aware, Mr Tebb, that I very much mightn't, being conscious that it was only by a fluke that I succeeded in doing it this time. Still, I should be only too happy in having so promising a pupil."

"Fluke, you call it, do you? Next time, maybe, I'll fluke you. Brown, you place his act where it don't clash with ours, and when it's on you call on me. You'll find me willing to oblige."

Mr Tebb, swaggering across the ring, disappeared from sight, as if the further proceedings had no interest for him. Miss Price addressed herself to the latest acquisition.

"You shouldn't have said you'd go through the act with him—I wish you hadn't. He's a dangerous man; he neither forgives nor forgets; he'll do you a mischief if he can."

"It's very good of you, Miss Price, to show so much solicitude on my behalf. In my time I have met several persons who would have done me a mischief if they could. I must do with Mr Tebb as I did with them—I must try to prevent him."

The Greatest Bender the World has ever seen looked up at him with her big, honest eyes as if she were genuinely concerned on his behalf. Before she had a chance of hinting as much in words Mrs Brown spoke.

"Well, sir, it seems that you can fight as well as shoot nothing out of a gun. Is there anything else you can do?"

"I used to be rather decent with a pair of Indian clubs, swinging them, you know. It's rather effective if they're swung well to music."

The notion seemed to commend itself to the Circus King.

"That's not a bad idea of yours; and I've got the very costume for an act like that, bought it only a week or two ago. A French Zouave's, dark-blue jacket and waistcoat, baggy Turkish trousers, yellow leggings, white gaiters, sky-blue sash,

and a red fez with a yellow tassel. The coat might be a little tight, perhaps, but nothing to speak of. You'll look magnifi cent as a French Zouave, sir."

Otway seemed doubtful.

"A coat that's a little tight doesn't seem promising for swinging Indian clubs: you want plenty of room about the arms and shoulders."

"Take the coat off, sir, take the coat off; and the waistcoat too, if you like. Hand them to the attendant who hands you the clubs. You want a uniform like that to make an effective entrance in. Leave all that sort of thing to me."

"Is there anything else you can do?" persisted the insatiable Mrs Brown. Then she went on to explain. "You see, sir, our programme wants strengthening, both as regards quantity and quality. We ought to have at least five more turns."

"I'm afraid I can't undertake to give you that."

"Come, my dear sir," urged the Circus King, in a tone of encouragement, "there's only two more wanted, we've got three already. There's the shooting act."

"The shooting act!"

Mrs Brown's deep diapason was meant to express the last degree of disdain, but her husband stuck to his guns.

"Yes, my dear, the shooting act. As I have said, over and over again, it's one of the greatest acts at present before the public, and I don't intend that the money I paid for that matchless apparatus shall be wasted. Then there's the boxing show and the Indian clubs, that's three turns. Now—think! can't you find a fourth? Anything will do: quantity is what we want, not quality."

His wife added a postscript of her own.

"We should like a little quality if there's any available."

"Of course, my dear, of course; our good friend here understands that quite well. He's not likely to offer us anything which is not of the highest quality, but—now, have you thought?"

"Well, there is one thing, and I fancy, from your point of view, that that's the best of the lot, at which I am—although I say it—a bit of a dabster."

"I knew there was, I was convinced of it. In you, my dear sir, the artiste exudes from every pore. And that is?"

"Throwing."

"Throwing?" Brown's face fell. "But anyone can throw."

"Not quite in the sense I mean. You hang up a lot of small bottles on strings as they do in shooting galleries. You give me some round shot, I throw them at the bottles, and with each shot smash one in regular order. Or you have them numbered, and I smash them in any order the audience likes to name. I'll smash glass balls, as they're sent up out of a trap, perhaps eight out of ten, and do it pretty smartly too. I'll throw a ball up in the air and hit it with another as it descends, and do it with three or four at once. You start half-a-dozen men running round the ring with all their might, wearing, say, grotesque hats, and carrying small articles, I'll send the hats flying, and what they're carrying also; if you like, knock pipes out of their mouths. Place small figures at different points near the roof, I'll tumble them all over while you say Jack Robinson."

"Without apparatus?"

"With nothing but my hand and some small balls. If you're really good at throwing there is no end of telling things which you can do."

The Circus King's manner suggested something like enthusiasm.

"My dear, dear boy, I'm not surprised! I needed no telling! I saw it at a glance! Directly I observed you on the boat I said to myself: 'There's talent—talent that's unique.' Your idea's immense—immense! Consider everything signed, sealed, and settled. We'll rehearse this afternoon—with full orchestra—seven instruments. I'll rush off to the printer's, have handbills printed, posters printed, programmes printed. Within two hours every man, woman, and child in this city shall know that talent has arrived in Rouen. Before long we shall have made you known to all France—to all Europe—I may say, to the entire world. Depend on me, my dear, dear boy, depend on me!"

Otway only laughed.

As he was moving off Miss Price touched him on the arm. She had exchanged her professional attire for the costume of every-day life. He thought how nice she looked, and what a pleasant face she had.

"What's he going to give you for it all?"

"Give? Do you mean pay me? Oh, we haven't yet touched on the question of terms."

"Haven't you? Then, if you take my advice, you pretty soon will, unless you are a simple-minded innocent or money's no object."

"But money's an object of very considerable importance."

"Then have everything on a fair and square business basis at once. There he is, tackle him now, before he goes to the printer."

Thus prompted, he waylaid the Circus King as he was on the point of departure.

"By the way, Mr Brown, we have said nothing yet about terms. What are you going to pay me in return for all I am going to do for you?"

"What am I going to pay you? My dear boy, this inquiry is unexpected." He looked as if it were, and unwelcome also. "As an amateur—of course you are an amateur—it is the general custom to pay a premium—often a very large premium — for the magnificent advertisement obtained by making a first appearance in an establishment of such universal reputation as mine."

"Is it? Then I'm not that kind of amateur. With me it's a question of no pay, no play."

"Dear me! dear me! I had no idea that you had such a commercial mind. I wish to be generous—I am always generous. But at the same time I wish to be just to myself, and—and to Mrs Brown. And, of course, so far as you are concerned the whole thing's merely an experiment which may result in fiasco. Shall we say—shall we say——"

He was evidently thinking how little he should say. Otway cut his meditations short.

"No we sha'n't, that isn't enough, you'll have to make it more than that."

"My dear, dear boy, I haven't even named a figure yet. Shall we say—eh—five francs a night?"

"We'll say ten, cash down each evening before I commence to perform. Of course, that is only to start with. If I make the resounding success we're both of us expecting I shall require a very considerable advance in a very short time."

"My dear sir, what a financial soul you have." Mr Brown sighed. "Then we'll say ten."

As he quitted the managerial presence it all seemed to him excruciatingly funny. He had not been inside a circus for years, and now he was to perform in one!—to do four "turns" each

evening for ten francs a night! Could the future have any queerer fate in store for him than that?

Quitting the circus premises he found the Dandison Brothers loafing about the entrance. Some of them had English newspapers. He heard one of them say, as he strolled past:

"This Jacob Gunston's a fair scorcher. Fancy tackling two chaps like that in a railway carriage single-handed, and in broad daylight, mind."

It was Sam Tebb who spoke next.

"And getting clean away with all those bank-notes, over ten thousand pounds' worth. But, mark my words, it will be those bank-notes which will do him. So soon as he changes one the 'tecs will be on his track, and then it'll only be a question of a few hours before he's buckled."

George Otway, as he went out, pressed his hand against his jacket pocket. In it was the wallet which contained the bank-notes of which Sam Tebb had spoken. Ebenezer Pullen's fortune did not bid fair to be of much service to him after all. But at least he would not be compelled to change one of the notes while he continued to be in receipt of the munificent sum of ten solid francs a night.

As he was turning into the Rue Thiers a carriage came round the corner out of the Rue Jeanne d'Arc. On the opposite side, facing the horses, a girl was sitting, who had her face turned from him, as if she were looking at something which was on the other side of the street.

It was Miss Dollie Lee, the original cause of all the trouble that had come to him. The sight of her so startled him that he stood stock still, as if his feet had become suddenly glued to the pavement. Had she seen him? What was she doing there? Who was she with? What did her presence in Rouen portend? These questions, rushing through his brain, received no answer.

While, all bewildered, he was endeavouring to ask himself if he should continue his progress or choose another way, he heard a voice, speaking behind him, say distinctly:

"Jacob Gunston!"

He wheeled round on his heels. There was no one near who could possibly have been the speaker, indeed, there was no one within fifty yards of where he stood. And the voice had seemed to come from someone who was standing close to his ear.

Was that hideous name to haunt him?

CHAPTER XXV

SEMADINI'S TROUPE

"I AM sure he will kill you if he gets a chance."

Miss Price and George Otway — "Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist"—were having a frugal mid-day meal together at the Café de l'Etoile; the words were addressed by the lady to the gentleman. They were spoken in all seriousness; he received them with a twinkle in his eyes. Leaning towards her across the table he replied, in a light-hearted undertone:

"Entirely in confidence, and between ourselves, in my time I have encountered two or three persons who, I believe had the desire to kill me if they could only get the chance The chance to do that sort of thing is not found every day; it is just that which has been always wanting. I must make it my particular business to see that, on this occasion, in the case of the gentleman you refer to, it is wanting still."

Her shrewd, honest eyes did not return the twinkle which was in his, her whole expression denoted genuine concern.

"You take things so lightly; I wish you wouldn't. Sam Tebb's a man who'd stick at nothing to pay a grudge he owed. After what has happened he'll leave no stone unturned to do you all the mischief he possibly can. He told me himself last night that he'd do worse than murder you; when he says a thing like that he means it. I wish you'd promise me that you'd be on your guard."

It was a moment or two before George Otway answered. When he did it was a little more gravely than before, but still with a smile.

"If it were not that I do take things so lightly I'd have been dead and buried long ago. Taking it all in all, Dame Fortune has not used me over well; it amuses me to dare her to do her worst. As for Mr Tebb, if he has designs upon my life I'll not put an end to them by worrying. But I promise

you this: if he gets either under or over my guard he'll have more shrewdness than I credit him with."

Although he spoke so carelessly he knew—as well as she knew—that, so far as it went, the peril was real enough. He had now been a member for eight days of the company which was intended to attract the public in their thousands to the Hippodrome of the New Century, and during those eight days things had happened.

As a performer—in his small way—he had won popular favour. His manipulation of the Indian clubs had met with the approval of the public; his exhibition of the art of self-defence had met with at least equal success; he had shown really unusual deftness in throwing at various objects under curious conditions; he had performed almost incredible feats with a rifle. Could he have had his way the turn in which he figured as Bull's Eye would have been cut bodily out of the programme, but the Circus King would not hear of it. It certainly was effective enough so far as confiding audiences went—the tune which he was supposed to shoot out on the piano was always received with a roar of applause—while the persuasion which had been brought to bear on Mr Brown from more quarters than one only succeeded in producing from him a restatement of the enormous sum which he had expended on the purchase of the "unrivalled apparatus" and a declaration of his resolution not to allow the money to be wasted.

"You know the thing is a fraud," Otway pointed out. "In the long run they're bound to find it out; indeed, as you're aware, they found it out once already."

"Just so, and that only bears out what I say. Because, although the show was given away, by a scoundrel"—here the Circus King regarded Otway with what that gentleman felt might almost be construed as a meaning glance—"they still come to see it. No, my dear boy, it's our most effective act, and the programme is not sufficiently strong to permit of our leaving out the most attractive item. In fact, talent's scandalously hard to find, and, in consequence, the programme's confoundedly weak; if something doesn't turn up to strengthen it very soon goodness only knows what will happen."

It certainly was the truth that in the Hippodrome of the New Century, in more senses than one, things were all at sixes and sevens. More than once the audience was so small that

the management seriously doubted if it was worth while going through the performance. One dreadful night less than a louis was taken at the doors. It was true that it was raining cats and dogs ; but, still—less than a louis !—not sixteen English shillings ! The takings never reached quite such a low point again ; but a circus, even when it is conducted on the most economical lines—as the Circus King's emphatically was—costs a good deal of money to keep it going. George Otway saw plainly enough that he had found no permanent resting-place, since, at any moment, the Hippodrome of the New Century might close its doors and its entire troupe be stranded. If he could manage to put together a few francs before that hour came he would have to be content, but he found it hard to save much out of ten francs a day.

Affairs were not improved by the dissensions which existed in the company itself. Mr Sam Tebb, the "pillar" of the Dandison Brothers' troupe of acrobats, had taken a most pronounced dislike to the new Bull's Eye, and, so far from endeavouring to conceal his dislike, he lost no opportunity of flourishing it in the public face. Although the relations between Miss Price and Otway could not have been more innocent—and were no concern of his in any case—he chose to regard them with his most jaundiced eye. Since thrashing the gentleman was a task which he would undoubtedly have found difficult of accomplishment, in a spirit which was neither heroic nor lover-like he actually tried violence on the lady instead. Unfortunately for him—if luckily for the lady—George Otway caught him in the act, the result being that he was handled in a fashion in which he had not been handled for many a year. If it had not been that they were interrupted the contest might have had very serious consequences indeed.

The following evening Mr Tebb—who certainly was not without bull-dog courage of a kind—in spite of all protests from his friends and the management, insisted on stepping into the ring and putting on the gloves with Otway, when, as One of England's Champion Boxers, that gentleman proceeded to give the audience an illustrated lesson in the art of self-defence. Tebb had drunk enough bad brandy to make his natural obstinacy more unmanageable still, and to inflame him with an altogether uncontrollable desire to pay Otway out for the treatment he had accorded him the night before. Nothing more of the nature of a fight to a finish was probably ever seen

in a circus ring before. Tebb would not be denied. Although he inflicted heavy punishment he was himself sent to ground over and over again, only, each time, to renew the attack with increased ferocity.

Fortunately—as it turned out—the spectators, on that occasion, were few, if select; yet by the time that Tebb was dragged—kicking, struggling, and cursing—from the ring, the place was in an uproar. A large section of the people present not unnaturally resented the substitution of a sanguinary, and by no means scientific, encounter, for an elegant display of the more graceful characteristics of boxing. Women and children screamed; men shouted "Shame"; refusing to allow the performance to continue after Tebb had been dragged away, until the Circus King himself came forward, and, in somewhat peculiar French, proffered such apologies as were within his power. Even then, during the remainder of the evening, electricity was in the air, so that the programme concluded amid sounds which were much more suggestive of booing and hissing than applause.

"I've borne more from Sam Tebb than any other man ever would have done," declared the Circus King; "but that's the last time he shall ever set foot in a ring of mine. I know something of Frenchmen; it doesn't take much to make them red-hot with excitement; it would have needed very little to have made that crowd go for the blooming show itself. If there had been more of them they'd have wrecked it."

The Dandison Brothers did not again appear in the Hippodrome of the New Century. With one accord the eight set upon their pillar; and, beyond a shadow of doubt, used him as no pillar would desire to be treated. Then, shaking the dust of Rouen off their feet, they started in search of fresh fields and pastures new; in other words, of a fresh engagement and another pillar. Tebb declined to budge. It was then that he announced, in the hearing of quite a number of persons, that before he finished with George Otway he would do worse than murder him; among those who listened there was not one who doubted that he would do his utmost to keep to the letter of his word.

Otway himself was only too well aware that he had, without the slightest intention of doing anything of the kind, added another to the already sufficiently long list of his enemies—

one who would not impossibly prove to be the most implacable of them all.

The place which the Dandison Brothers had occupied in the programme was taken by a so-called troupe of performing wild animals. Against these Otway did vigorously protest.

The troupe—which was a most heterogeneous affair—consisted of a hippopotamus, a pleasing variety of serpents of all sorts and sizes, half-a-dozen wolves, two lionesses and two lions, and a tiger and a tigress. Their proprietor was a man who called himself Semadini; a little, hatchet-faced fellow who, on the face of things, was quite incapable of adequately controlling such a menagerie. He had had a partner; but, the troupe being a financial failure, the partner had had enough of it. Semadini, together with his wife—a big, raw-boned woman—and two sons—lads respectively about sixteen and seventeen—was left in sole charge of this singular, and, indeed, uncontrollable collection. Semadini's own income had lately been so precarious and scanty that he had scarcely been able to keep himself and his family, let alone supply his animals, with an adequate supply of proper food. The consequence was that they were all of them more or less in a state of savage hunger—although Semadini strenuously denied it. Otway perceived that such was the case directly he saw them.

The idea was that a large cage should be erected in the centre of the arena; that the animals should be let loose in it; and that then Semadini should enter and go through the usual senseless performance with them. The fact that he declined, point blank, to carry out the latter part of the programme showed plainly enough what his opinion was of their tempers and of the state of discipline they were in. He wanted to stay outside the cage, and, so far as possible, go through the performance from there, a notion which the Circus King altogether declined to countenance.

"You've undertaken to enter a den of wild beasts and there demonstrate the power of the human will. How are you going to demonstrate anything if you stop outside? People will laugh; and in this circus we've had enough of that sort of thing just lately."

"You'll be his murderer if you do send him in," maintained George Otway. "What's more, you'll place yourself in a very responsible position if you let the creatures go into the ring at all—cage or no cage. They're more savage even than in

their original state; he admits himself that it's some time since they went through what he calls a performance. If they suddenly find themselves together, with a number of people about them, they'll not only go for each other, they'll go for the people also; it'll have to be a stronger cage than this man's gimcrackery which will keep them from getting at the audience, especially that great brute of a hippopotamus. Another thing—and to this I would call your particular attention—those living cages are none too strong; they look to me as if they were falling to pieces; he seems to have tinkered them together with tin tacks. Those animals of his have only got to get really desperate and throw themselves about in style; they'll be loose in no time, and flying at your throats."

Mr Brown rubbed his bristly chin, appearing not to relish Otway's outspoken remarks. Semadini, finding himself stranded at Rouen after a long course of ill-fortune, had been glad to accept any offer bearing promise of immediate cash, come from what quarter it might, so Brown had got him at his own terms. Those terms were so low, and—in face of the defection of the Dandison Brothers—the Circus King was so conscious of the desperate need in which his establishment stood of a fresh attraction, that very strong reasons would have been needed to induce him not to make the most of what he felt was, for him, an excellent bargain. So he allowed Otway's expostulatory words to go unanswered, though he could not but admit that the noise which the hungry creatures were making was a disquieting sound.

On the evening of the day on which he endeavoured, in vain, to persuade the Circus King to have nothing to do with Semadini and his animals, George Otway made his very last appearance at the Hippodrome of the New Century.

All through the day he had been conscious of a curious uneasiness. To begin with, in the night Elsie Thornton had called to him again; called to him for help. He had heard her voice with such appalling distinctness, her need had been so hideously urgent, that he could not shake off the feeling that it behoved him to go to her assistance without a moment's hesitation or delay. Yet, whither was he to go?—north, south, east, west? By now she might be on the other side of the globe for all that he could tell. What was the use of his setting out, like some mad knight errant, on a journey to nowhere?

Another cause of his uneasiness was the fact that he had, that day, again seen Dollie Lee. He was entering the cathedral, seeking, in the shelter of its peaceful magnificence, that calm of mind of which he stood in such sore need, when, as he swung open the outer leathern door, she came through the inner one. They all but collided. Then she passed into the street and he under the gothic arches of Notre Dame. He was not even sure that she had noticed him at all. She was laughing at the moment; how well he knew her pretty, careless laughter, and how the sound of it seemed to send a thrill right through him! She was with a gentleman—he only saw that it was not Frank Andrews—by whom her whole attention seemed to be absorbed. Noting the elegance of her attire, the indefinable air with which she wore it, the atmosphere of the Lady of Fashion which she carried about with her, George Otway found himself suddenly borne back to a world out of which he seemed to have been borne, centuries ago, for ever.

He needed all the peace of mind that the cathedral could give him.

Then there was his concern on the subject of Semadini's animals. His real fear was that—unless some precaution was taken, which did not seem likely to be taken—some frightful catastrophe might ensue. To crown all, there was Mr Tebb. He was always meeting Mr Tebb. He had a shrewd suspicion that Sam Tebb was dogging his steps, though with what intention he could not conceive. Even Tebb could hardly meditate assault and battery in broad daylight in the streets of Rouen. Yet, wherever he was, when he looked round, Sam seemed to be somewhere in sight.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRICK WHICH FAILED

WHEN, as the hour for commencing the performance was approaching, he was moving through the ramshackle passage-way, which led to what were ironically called the artistes' dressing-rooms, he encountered the Greatest Bender the World has ever seen, Miss Price's greeting—in the light of his own forebodings—took him somewhat aback.

"Do you know, I'm feeling all mops-and-brooms; I can't make it out; I hope nothing awful's going to happen."

"What should happen?"

"Why, heaps of things; in a place like this there's always plenty of awful things which can happen. I know the last time I felt like this I put both legs out while doing the splits; I thought I was going legless to an early grave. That was pretty awful, I can tell you that."

"If you feel as if anything of that kind were going to happen to you to-night, if you take my very strong advice, you'll keep out of the bill, let Brown say what he likes. In your case a warning voice on that subject is something which you distinctly ought to listen to."

She shook her head; regarding him with glances which were at once both doubtful and anxious.

"No; this time it isn't myself that I'm afraid for; it's—oh, I can't make out what it is." Then she added, with a sudden change of subject: "I wish those brutes wouldn't make that horrible hubbub."

Semadini's animals seemed to be all roaring at once; in their roaring, to the observant ear, there was a very uncomfortable note. Otway knit his brows.

"Semadini—or, failing him, then Brown—ought to feed them; they're half beside themselves with hunger, that's what it is. I've spoken to Brown about it; he says it's no business of his to feed other people's cattle. If he doesn't look out, before he's finished he'll wish that he had made it his business.

If you want to keep wild beasts in captivity on their good behaviour you have to feed them properly. If you don't, it's not only a shameful cruelty, it's shortsighted policy; and when they're genuinely hungry, the Lord help anyone they can get at."

That evening there was a larger audience than George Otway had hitherto seen. There was a fair number of people in all the seats; the cheaper parts were crowded. Possibly the news that Semadini's animals would make their first appearance had attracted the public; but George Otway could not but feel that there might be some other, and more sinister, explanation of the unwonted concourse.

The Circus King came to him while he was squeezing himself into the ridiculous Zouave costume he was compelled to don for his first turn. The manager was all jubilation.

"Told you, my boy, those brutes would fetch em; I ought to know what draws the people if anybody does. There's something like money in the house to-night."

"Then if I were you I'd feed the brutes who've brought it."

"Just what I was thinking of doing; the fact is, they're making such a din that they pretty nearly drown the band. But Semadini says that it would never do to feed them now; he says that after they're fed there ought to be an interval of at least three hours before they're taken into the ring."

"Then Semadini's an idiot; and, if you'll bring him here, I'll have much pleasure in telling him so. If you turn those creatures out into the arena hungry there'll be trouble; and if it isn't trouble of the very worst kind you may think yourself lucky."

"You're an alarmist, my dear boy, an alarmist; if we didn't occasionally take some risks our profession couldn't go on for a single day. And don't try to teach your grandmother; Semadini knows his business. His show will come on at the very end; after your shooting act."

"My shooting act! That's something else I'd wish you could manage to do without."

"My dear boy! my dear boy! On a night like this it will make a bigger hit even than Semadini." The expression of the speaker's countenance became somewhat changed as, after a moment's hesitation, he continued: "There's only one drawback; that brute Tebb's in front. We couldn't very well refuse to admit him, as he offered his money at the pay

box with the rest, and was accompanied by half-a-dozen friends."

"Brown—you must excuse my saying so—but you're an ass. Whatever Sam Tebb offered you ought to have refused to admit him. He means mischief, as you know as well as I do, and he'll make it. What you call my shooting act will have to be omitted."

The Circus King chose to assume what he probably meant to be an air of dignity.

"I'd have you to know, sir, once more, that what I call your shooting act will not be omitted. You're paid to go through with it; you're announced to go through with it; the house expects you to go through with it; and you'll have to go through with it; unless you're the kind of person I've not hitherto supposed you to be. I would inform you, further, sir, that I'm not accustomed to be called an ass; particularly by one of my own artistes; don't let it occur again. As Brown, the Circus King, in this establishment my word goes, and my word only. Criticism of any kind is uninvited, and is objected to. A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse, sir; let that hint be final, sir."

The Circus King having departed, George Otway shrugged his shoulders.

"Extraordinary how a man may pass his whole life in fancying himself something and yet be nothing after all. I don't believe that much intellect is required to run a circus on the lines of the Hippodrome of the New Century, but I fear that even that small modicum Brown's without. Semadini's brutes mad with hunger; I with that barefaced fraud to brazen out; Sam Tebb thirsting for anybody's gore in general and mine in particular: it doesn't need a vivid imagination to foresee that if, before the evening's done, there isn't a pretty flare-up, which isn't down in the programme, it'll be a wonder."

George Otway prophesied better than he knew.

The moment he made his first entry he understood that matters would very probably be—so far as he was personally concerned—even worse than he had guessed. Sam Tebb's voice was audible in insolent salutation.

"Here's the little beauty! What ho! my bounding blackguard!"

Almost more ominous still were the murmurs which pro-

ceeded from a small group of French officers who sat together. From the remarks they made they apparently resented his; being attired in Zouave uniform, speaking of it as a "scandal,' and an "insult to the army."

He made haste to remove at least the offending cap, coat, and waistcoat, a proceeding on his part which was greeted with significant applause.

But what disconcerted him more than anything else was the sudden discovery that Dollie Lee was present; she was sitting in the front row among a number of smartly dressed French and English people who evidently formed one party, and who had plainly come to laugh rather than to admire. That she would recognise him seemed scarcely possible, since his cheeks were still clean shaven, and, by way of extra disfigurements, he wore a wig and a false moustache. But the mere fact of having to make such a spectacle of himself in presence of the woman who had used him as she had done was a sufficient strain upon his nervous system. Not only did he feel incapable of doing his best, but, somehow, the band and he seemed to be at loggerheads, so that, when he was supposed to be swinging his clubs to music, they kept one time and he another. When the turn was concluded the applause was distinctly feeble. As he was quitting the scene he heard Dollie Lee's musical laughter ringing out above all other sounds. It stung him as if he had been cut by the lash of a whip.

"Went rather slack, didn't it?" commented Mr Brown, as he came out of the ring.

"Slack!" retorted Otway, with a laugh which was but a forced echo of Dollie's merriment. "If you want to know what slack means you wait till you see how my other turns go."

The spirit of laughter, once evoked, proved impossible to lay. The audience was in a merry mood: quick to see humour in everything. They screamed at Mrs Brown on the slack wire as the Dancing Walrus; screamed even more than that lady altogether relished. They laughed at Sallie Price on her first appearance as Pauline Petroski, the Russian Lady Bare-Backed Rider of the Steppes; when she came out of the ring her cheeks showed white with rage through the grease paint.

"The cowards, to laugh at me! because that wretched

horse slipped! It was Sam Tebb who started them, I know! Only wait, and I'll be even with him yet."

"It strikes me that, while we're waiting, he'll be getting about even with us. If the whole force of the establishment had been required to do it, Brown ought to have kept him out."

Miss Price thought that, as he was speaking, George Otway looked more serious than she had ever seen him. His boxing act was omitted, it being strongly felt that, if Tebb was in front, he might insist on donning the gloves; and then, in the present excited state of the house, there might be turmoil indeed. The throwing act, which had hitherto always gone so well, for once in a way fell flat.

The erudite Circus King had discovered some affinity between throwing and the Greek Games. He had insisted on entitling the act

GLAUCUS THE GREEK! THROWING EXTRAORDINARY!

THE OLYMPIAN GAMES OUTDONE!

THE DISCOBOLUS AT A DISCOUNT!

The fact that these words appeared on the programme in what he called French, as well as in English, did not tend to an improvement of their sense. To make the thing consistent—for, in his way, he was a great stickler for consistency!—he had dressed Otway in what he called Greek costume; the principal features of which consisted of long, flowing hair and beard and a huge, shapeless cretonne garment, of an uncomfortably vivid green, which he called a peplus. George, taking nothing seriously, would have been willing to have been rigged up as Guy Faux; and, indeed, Brown had proved himself no bad judge of the taste of that particular section of the public for which he catered. So far, applause had been the order of the day; no one seemed to see anything incongruous in the whole affair.

But that evening there chanced to be persons present of a more cultivated taste, with a keen eye for the ridiculous. As Glaucus the Greek entered the arena, his green cretonne "peplus" streaming behind him, a shout of laughter arose, which was not made less by Tebb shouting out:

"What ho! my bonny boy, you're back again; you don't

think that that lot of furniture covering can hide you from your father's eye."

George Otway saw that Dollie Lee, with her handkerchief hiding her face, was doubled up in inextinguishable laughter; one of the things which had first attracted him to her was her quickness to see a jest. He could have taken Tebb by the throat and throttled him there and then. He could hit nothing; he missed most of the glass balls as they rose up into the air out of the trap; he even missed most of the bottles, which, up to then, he had never missed. His occasional hits were greeted with derisive applause; his frequent misses with yells of laughter; when the act was ended the whole audience was holding its sides. As he passed he distinctly heard Dollie say:

"That's one of the very funniest things I ever saw in all my life!"

The fact that what the girl said was true, that he had been so unintentionally funny, made it all the bitterer. That he should have descended to play the clown—and such a clown—with her to feast on his discomfiture!

"You don't seem none of you up to the mark, to-night," was Brown's greeting as Otway came raging out of the ring. "One would have thought that, with a fine house like this, you'd all of you have done your level best; but, hang me! if you don't all of you seem to be trying to do your level worst. You're not all of you supposed to be clowns, don't you know; you're not all of you meant to start 'em laughing. Perhaps you'll remember that when you go on for your shooting act, and try to leave an impression on the high-class audience which we've got in this establishment to-night that there's someone in the place who isn't a perfect fool."

George Otway said nothing, though he could have said much. He had a strong premonition that the worst was still to come; that Sam Tebb, for one, meant to get some solid return for the money which he had paid at the door. Had it been feasible, with or without Brown's permission, he would have declined to go on for the shooting act even at the eleventh hour. But, since the audience had already hotly resented the omission of two items from the programme, he recognised that he would probably be incurring more risk by leaving it out than by going through with it.

So, when the time came, he entered the arena as Bull's

Eye, the American Champion Shootist, the Marksman of the Plains, to do the last turn that was ever enacted in the Hippodrome of the New Century.

His entry was received by the audience with chilling silence, in striking contrast to the shrieks of laughter in which they had just been indulging. As if to make up for their stillness, Semadini's animals began, all at once, to make a frantic uproar, which almost suggested that the ill-fed beasts were making frenzied efforts to escape from their cages.

The act began with some comparatively simple feats of marksmanship. Otway, who—judged by the standard of the ordinary sportsman—was a first-rate shot, had insisted on doing them fairly and squarely, with the unassisted aid of his own gun and eye. That night his very honesty of purpose proved a drawback. He was conscious that there was some unwonted excitement behind the scenes; realised each second more and more plainly that there was something unpleasantly ominous about the increasing discord which Semadini's half-maddened brutes were making in their rotten cages. His eye was out, his hand unsteady. As when he was throwing, so now with the gun; he could hit nothing. When the people perceived—as they imagined—what a poor figure he made even with a gun, the laughter recommenced. He noted—in spite of, and above—everything else, the little musical peal which came from Dollie's lips each time he missed.

Presently he came to what was supposed to be one of his two great feats. Fixed against a board on one side of the arena was a device consisting of crystal letters some ten or twelve inches high. In the centre of each letter was a small metal disc. He was supposed to aim at and hit this disc, and each hit was supposed to electrically illuminate one of the letters, until the whole design blazed out "VIVE LA FRANCE"! As a matter of fact, the magazine rifle with which he was supposed to fire was charged with blank cartridges; each time he pulled the trigger, with his foot he pressed a button which was concealed in the flooring, and that lighted each letter in turn.

He went through the first part without a hitch; there flamed the device, the apparent result of his almost incredible skill. The people stared and cheered, a little puzzled to find that the man who could just now do nothing could

yet bring off, with such certainty and ease, a seeming miracle. Otway noted, as a bad sign, that a loud and altogether uncalled-for volume of applause proceeded from a group of men, among whom Sam Tebb was a conspicuous figure.

And all the while he was aware that behind the scenes that inexplicable excitement was growing more and more, and that Semadini's animals were continually raging more wildly.

He came to the second feat, which was, if possible, an even grosser piece of humbug than the first. What purported to be an ordinary piano confronted him, the wires and keyboard being disclosed by the removal of the entire front. Attached to each wire was again a metal disc, which he was supposed to hit, and so strike a note; and thus, in time, "fire out" a tune, in this case the "Marseillaise." The whole affair, however, being actually produced by pressing a concealed button as before.

The moment he pulled the trigger he knew that something was wrong; although he simultaneously pressed the button no note came, until after a perceptible interval, when it sounded with disconcerting clearness. The audience tittered. He pulled the trigger a second time; still no note, till after an even longer interval than before. The audience laughed outright. A third time; on this occasion no note came at all, even though he waited, pressing the button again and again. He glanced round at the giggling people, noting Dollie's profound enjoyment of his discomfiture. He looked towards the artistes' entrance; there seemed to be no one there to render him assistance. He would have to carry the thing off single-handed somehow, or face the storm which he saw was brewing.

Before he could decide what to do—whether to do anything at all—the issue was withdrawn from his control. As he was about to draw the trigger for the third time the piano began to play the Marseillaise right through, seemingly of its own accord, from beginning to end. The audience broke into a roar of inextinguishable laughter. While the bewildered Otway was wondering whether the instrument was bewitched, or—failing that—what could have happened to the thing, Sam Tebb climbed on to the bench on which he had been sitting, holding something in his hand. Then George Otway understood.

Tebb began to shout at the top of his voice, in a mixture of idiomatic English and very colloquial French, whose meaning was none the less sufficiently plain to those who heard.

"It's a fraud! a dirty swindle! that's what his little game is! He can't shoot for nuts—or nutshells either. There's nothing in that gun of his; he just stamps upon a push-piece, and that does the business. But for once in a way I've been in front of him; I've tapped the wire; I've got the push-piece in my hand; I'll fire out the 'Marseillaise' for you!"

He did. The ill-treated national air of France crashed through the circus in somewhat original time. There were shouts of "Shame! shame!" mingled with shrieks of laughter.

"Now, my boys," shouted Sam, "let's be even with the sweep; let's have our money's worth out of him; the dirty hound!"

He came scrambling down over the seats into the ring, followed by twenty or thirty others. The rest of the audience, catching the infection of his and their example, rose to its feet. In another moment almost the entire assemblage was making for the man who had been so conspicuously marked out as a butt on whom to vent their common indignation. George Otway, without flinching from where he stood, waited for their onrush with a smile upon his face.

Suddenly above the shouts and cries of the excited people rose another sound; one still more ominous: the sound of the crackling of wood. All at once the arena was filled with a blinding smoke.

"Fire! fire!" someone shouted.

"Il a crié au feu!" a Frenchman screamed.

On the instant the mood of the people changed. Excitement became bewilderment; eagerness, doubt; fury, terror. From a determination to wreak vengeance on the man who had offended them they passed to a frenzied desire to save their own lives.

Even above the tumult of the frightened people there rose the voices of wild beasts; and something more than their voices. Instinct told George Otway that his fears had been realised: that those ramshackle cages had tumbled to pieces when the moment came in which their strength was really put to the trial.

Semadini's troupe of wild animals had broken loose.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST OF THE HIPPODROME

IT was some seconds before the bewildered spectators realised the full extremity of their position; it is doubtful if some of them ever realised it at all. The whole place was in confusion. When a large number of people are gathered together in an ill-constructed building, the entrances and exits to which are of the most rudimentary kind, there can be no worse beginning. The exterior of the structure was of canvas: it had the appearance, indeed, of a huge canvas tent, like the travelling circuses with which we are familiar enough in England. But the Circus King's establishment was not intended to be removed daily, or even weekly, from town to town or from village to village. It was his custom to visit large towns only, and, having arrived at one, to remain there, sometimes for months together. With the idea, therefore, of giving to his circus at least the seeming of more stability, he had lined the canvas with an ingenious matchboard frame, thus giving it the appearance, when within, of being built of wood—an addition which, in anything like unpropitious weather, made the interior drier and warmer—and, to that extent, added to the comfort of his patrons.

It was just this addition, however, which, at a moment like this, increased the peril a hundredfold.

When, incited by Sam Tebb, the majority of the audience thought only of taking senseless and cowardly vengeance upon George Otway, the remainder, taken unawares, unhinged, unnerved, thought only of fleeing from the uproar thus unexpectedly aroused. Constitutionally averse to scenes of all and every kind—fearful of they scarcely knew what—their one desire was to get out of the circus into the safety of the open air. Women and children screamed; they clung to each other. Fathers sought to protect their frightened families from suffering from the excitement of their fellows; they thrust at the angry men who went wildly stampeding

past them. Everywhere people were looking about them with apprehensive gaze, seeking for the quickest means to escape from the building. They saw the performer standing in the ring, in his shirt, bare-headed, motionless, erect, with a smile upon his face, apparently waiting for the frenzied crowd to do its worst to him; all they wanted was not to see him, to get away—somehow, anyhow—before they became witnesses of the tragedy which might at any moment be enacted before their unwilling eyes.

In their unthinking haste they defeated their own purpose, blocking each other's passage in their eagerness to be out of the building, so that the cries of the women and children became louder, the expostulations of the men who sought to safeguard them more vigorous; while, in the arena below, the people were making a noise which recalled the barking of hounds who, at the end of a hunt, are closing upon the quarry which stands at bay.

It was while the crowd contained in the flimsy building was already in this state of dangerous confusion that the ominous sound of crackling wood became audible, that blinding, choking smoke came driving into the auditorium. It was then that someone shouted:

"Fire!"

That most awful of all cries when men and women are crowded together within imprisoning walls.

For one brief, merciful moment hardly anyone really understood what the cry really meant, even guessed at the nature of the danger which was already on them.

They passed by a series of well-defined stages to awful comprehension. First, the noise which had prevailed was stilled. In the arena men ceased to shout at Otway, to bellow threats, to rain curses. On the benches around women and children stayed their screams, husbands and fathers hushed their voices. For a second or two a new, sudden, strange silence filled all the place—the silence of expectancy, of wonder, of inquiry. People looked in each other's faces, asking—dumbly—what was the meaning of the something in the air; what was about to happen; what fresh item was to form part of the evening's programme. And all of them were still; there was only that dreadful noise of crackling wood.

Then again someone shouted: "Fire!"

And the questions which they had been asking themselves

were answered—they understood. The confusion which had for the moment ceased became, on the instant, more confounded.

"Fire! fire! fire!" shouted some, again and again, with ever-increasing violence, as if the mere repetition would avail them anything.

"God have mercy on us!" screamed some; "Help! help! help!" others, as if by mere force of lung-power they might command it. Some called to each other by name, children cried to their parents, wives to their husbands, women to men.

And the men? from many of their lips came oaths. For, when a crowd, finding death, in its most horrid shape, grinning at it with devouring jaws, is seized by panic, there are not many heroes in it then. Chivalry goes by the board. Love is apt to be forgotten: all sense of duty lost. The order is—each for each. Life can only be won by fighting for it. In a fight of that sort it is strength, and strength only, which prevails—the weak must die.

So it was in that circus then. Men, returned to that state in which self-preservation was the one law of nature, began to thrust from them the women who turned to them as to their natural protectors. Fathers freed themselves violently from their children's clinging hands; husbands hurled from them their wives; lovers their sweethearts. They were like so many beasts contending madly with each other to be first out of the trap which was baited with death.

Two persons were present who preserved their calmness: one was George Otway. That quality in the man which seemed to make him more and more master of his fate the more fate threatened was in the forefront then. He had waited for the people to assail him, with smiling indifference and careless mien. Now that their madness had taken another shape, and much worse than the destruction with which they had menaced him was already on themselves, his indifference vanished; his calmness became a noble indignation. He saw that, by their own action, they were bringing on themselves—on to all they held dear to them—the doom they sought with such blind, insensate fury.

"For shame, men, for shame! Do you forget that you are men that you behave as if you were imbecile cowards! Don't conduct yourselves like madmen, and worse! Your best

chance of safety lies in keeping cool. The women and children first! if you will only keep your heads there is safety for all of you!"

His voice rang through the building, above the sound of the crackling wood, the din of the shrieking people. But he might as well have shouted to the wind. The crowd the gods have made mad it is not easy for one man, single-handed, to make sane.

"Let 'em alone! Let 'em burn, if they like, who cares?"

The speaker was Sam Tebb. He, the original cause of the confusion which promised to have so horrible an issue, was the other person in the building who kept his head. He stood alone by Otway's side, having gained that position before the alarm of fire was raised, intending to be the first to do him mischief. Now he kept his ground, looking about him at the frenzied people with a grin which, under the circumstances, was diabolical in its cynicism. He still held the disconnected end of the wire which was in electric communication with the piano; as he spoke, he again "fired out" the "Marseillaise." Otway snatched the wire from his hand.

To all the other discords was added the discord of the hungry brutes; the only paths to safety, already hideously insufficient, were blocked by maddened creatures, daring anything in their desire for food. Along the passage through which the performers had been wont to gain access to the ring crashed the hippopotamus. Three men, in the uniform of French soldiers, had fought their way through all sorts of living obstacles till they were actually at the doorway. Now it seemed that all they had to do was to fight each other, to see who should be through it first.

But someone was through it first for whom they had not reckoned — a tiger. And the new-comer showed as much eagerness to get in as they had been showing to get out. More, he was instantly reinforced by a comrade—his wife. A great tigress came pressing past him, with open jaws, from which projected huge yellow teeth, snarling as she came in a fashion it was not agreeable to listen to. Still more, close on the haunches of these two enormous striped cats, the most dangerous of all the carnivora, pressed two lionesses and a lion. True, they were not the largest of their kind, but they were still big enough, in their present mood, to work havoc in a frightened crowd of people who, even had they been able to

use them, were wholly without the means of self-protection. Without was heard the yapping of wolves, who, although tortured by hunger, had yet sufficient self-restraint to wait until their betters were satisfied, being conscious, perhaps, that there was enough for them all and to spare.

Thus the whole of Semadini's troupe was inside that circus in a space of time which scarcely extended to more than a second, ready to perform — though the performance which they were ready to go through was not of the description which was set down in the programme—and such of the audience as had some fragments of their wits still left to them were waiting for the performance to commence, though hardly with the feelings which they had anticipated would be theirs when they started out for their evening's amusement.

As had been the case when the alarm of fire was first given, there was an appreciable pause in the proceedings. Those who had some faint glimmering of what had taken place, of what was about to happen, ceased to contend with their fellows as to who should be first at the door. Their disposition was all at once in the contrary direction, they pressed back. Particularly was this the case with the three soldiers who, by the exercise of sheer brute strength, had gained the place of honour in the feast; they pressed back for all they were worth, evincing the same frantic desire to retreat as they had just been showing to advance.

The lions and the tigers evinced, on their side, an inclination to indulge in momentary consideration before proceeding to the next stage. Possibly the choice of subjects which they found confronting them was unexpectedly large. Perhaps, also, they were overawed by mere numbers. However that might have been, they remained for some moments where they were, neither going backwards nor forwards, but moving their heads, as if furtively, from side to side, with ugly, snarling, distended, salivarous jaws, ears laid well back, tails twisting and untwisting, beating against their sides, as if they strove to lash their rage still higher. One waited, with dread expectancy, for the instant in which they would make their spring and would have in their jaws something human to feed upon.

In the ring Tebb laughed.

Otway was silent. He still retained the rifle with which he was supposed to fire out the tune. Slipping out the blank

cartridges he supplied their place with the loaded ones which he used for the genuine tricks. Tebb perceived his purpose.

"The bullets in those things wouldn't penetrate a quarter-inch board—I know; I've had many a lark with them; you couldn't hardly kill a man with them. As for trying to kill a lion or a tiger with one of those things, why, you might as well use them to sink a man-of-war. You might sting 'em perhaps, but the more you sting them the nastier you'll make them. As for the hippopotamus, I don't believe they'd even tickle him. And he's the one who's going to do most mischief. Wait till he finds he's made a mistake by coming in here and starts looking for some way out. A steam-roller on the rampage will be nothing to him. The only good you can do with that pretty toy is to use it to blow your own brains out with."

"I'll use it to blow yours out first."

Tebb only grinned.

"I'm agreeable. There's going to be things going on in here very soon which I'd just as soon not see. It's bad enough to be burnt alive without being crushed to a jelly by a lot of frightened fools, not to speak of that light-weight of a hippo. But when it comes to being clawed about by Semadini's animals to save his pocket and provide them with a free meal, I draw the line at that. So as we're in for all the lot together, both you and me, I'd just as soon death comes to me out of that toy rifle—straight, I would. Hollo! here's something else, smoke and flame. Now the real fun is going to commence."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A HOLOCAUST

AS Tebb spoke, a great tongue of flame came leaping through the artistes' entrance, as if it were seeking to stretch itself out as far as possible to see what it could reach. Otway could feel the heat from where he was standing, though he was some nine or ten feet from it. Many who were nearer were scorched and singed; the clothes of some of those who were actually in front were set on fire. The disappearance of the flame was followed by blinding smoke, which got into people's eyes and ears and noses, so that they could neither see nor breathe. One effect it had; by getting into their throats and choking them, it stifled their cries, so that one might be sure that the tumult of shrieks which presently arose did not come from those who had suffered most. They perforce were still.

The hippopotamus, standing in the very passage-way of the smoke and flame, was driven by pain and terror to utter madness. It rushed wildly forward, seeking frenziedly for some way out of this awful trap into which it had untowardly wandered, giving utterance, as it went, to curious, ominous cries, which were half-grunts, half-squeals. Those people who could not get out of its way went down before it like ninepins. It lumbered over them, apparently heedless of the fact that they were beneath its tread.

Otway was all but carried off his feet by the rush of those who were anxious to avoid the maddened brute. His brain seemed to whirl round him. It was only by exercising a great effort that he was able to keep control of his senses. He was conscious that on one side Tebb was swearing lustily, while he battered with both fists someone who had appealed to him for help, possibly on the principle which supposes that a drowning man will clutch at a straw. Presently Otway realised that on his other side a woman was speaking to him.

"Please help me! please help me!" she gasped rather

than said. "Is there no way out? Can nothing be done? I don't want to be burnt, and I'm afraid of that great beast."

With altogether indescribable feelings George Otway became suddenly aware that the speaker was Dollie Lee. She had seemingly become separated from the members of her own party; perhaps in their frantic desire to save themselves at all and any price they had become oblivious of her existence. Her appearance, quaintly enough, irresistibly reminded him of Rugby football; she looked as if she had just come out of a hot scrimmage. There remained no trace of the daintiness with which he had always associated her. Her hat was off, obviously it had been torn from her head. Never a truer artistic instinct in the matter of a hat than Dollie Lee's. Her hair was in dire disarray, "pads," "rolls," and other contrivances of the hairdresser mingling with the hair itself. Her dress was torn away at the neck, as if someone had clung to it with fingers which refused to be loosed so long as there was something to hold on to. Part of her bodice had been torn away, probably when her dress had yielded, so that one white shoulder glanced up at Otway.

The spectacle she presented—for he knew that, had she been mistress of herself, nothing could have seemed more tragic to her than that she should appear in the least degree dishevelled, even with so much as a tress of hair loose or her hat on one side — the sound of her voice in his ears, although the hoarse, gasping accents in which she spoke were so unlike the soft harmonies of her natural tones; the consciousness that, if she was not exactly in his power she was helpless, and that during, at any rate, the next few moments he could do with her precisely what he would, and that probably no one but he and she would ever know what he did; these things served to clear his brain more than anything else could possibly have done.

He replied to her inquiry.

"If you will stick close to me I think that I may be able to get you out in safety. The people have lost their heads so completely that, for the moment, it's vain to think of trying to do anything for them: if we are not careful we shall be involved with them in wholesale destruction. Perhaps, if we show an example, some of them, regaining their senses, may follow our lead. Our best hopes of safety lies through the sides of the tent. The wood is but matchwood;

there is only canvas beyond. With a knife, and a little level-headedness, we should be able to win our way out easily."

Even while he spoke he had been steering her to the side of the tent, avoiding the people as best he could. He had perhaps forgotten that, in the disengaged hand, he still retained the miniature rifle, and that it was loaded with ball cartridge, if so his memory was jogged in singularly unpleasant fashion. Suddenly someone seized the butt: there was a report, an exclamation from the girl at his side. He saw that on her white shoulder there was a crimson stain. He turned to see who was responsible for the explosion; to find that Sam Tebb, whom he had left struggling with half-a-dozen people, had regained his side, and that it was he who had gripped the weapon. That the thing had been no accident was shown by the grin with which Tebb returned his gaze and by the words he uttered.

"Why, missy, he's trying to kill you! If I were you I wouldn't trust yourself to him; he's the kind of bloke who would murder anybody for a tanner. You had better throw yourself under the hippo's feet than let him get you in his hands!"

"You brute!" was Otway's only answer.

Rapidly transferring the rifle from one hand to the other he struck Sam with his clenched fist full in the face. Mr Tebb, taken unawares by the quickness with which the blow had been dealt, went staggering backwards. Before he could recover himself and return to the onslaught he was caught in an eddy of people who were endeavouring to avoid the maddened hippopotamus. Whether he would or would not, they bore him with them; for the time George Otway saw him no more.

He was able to devote himself to the girl beside him.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not much; I think it's only grazed my shoulder, but—it's pretty painful."

She closed her eyes, looking so white and frail that for the moment he feared she was going to faint.

"Did you—did you fire at me on purpose?"

"I didn't fire at all, it was that scoundrel who fired."

Her eyes opened very wide.

"But why did he fire at me?"

"I don't know that he did fire at you—in particular—his

one desire was to do me a mischief; he thinks he owes me a grudge. But this is not the place in which to attempt explanations, if we are not out of it quickly we shall probably never get out of it at all. I fancy that outside they're doing their best to extinguish the fire before it really gets hold of the tent, but if it does get hold of it—and, in spite of their efforts, it may do so at any moment—then we shall at once be in the heart of a flaming fiery furnace, and it will be a case of good-bye to this world for all of us."

He was aware that, while he was endeavouring to induce her to press forward she was regarding him with wondering and, indeed, half fearful eyes.

"I do not remember ever to have seen you before, but your voice sounds strangely familiar. Who are you?"

"We occasionally do encounter a voice which reminds us of one which we have heard somewhere, some time, before." It was an ironical impulse which induced him to add, "I am Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist, the Marksman of the Plains."

"Bull's Eye? The American Champion Shootist?" She echoed his words, with something in her tone and manner which suggested more than uneasiness. Suddenly she clung tightly to his arm, demanding, "What is that?"

There had been a thunderous roar, heartrending shrieks; then more roars, and more shrieks; then a tumult which it was not good to listen to. Otway knew well enough what had happened. He knew that Semadini's hungry brutes had singled out their victims and seized them; that they had leaped at helpless men and women and struck them down; that they were holding them prostrate beneath their murderous jaws, making ready to devour them. But he hardly saw his way to tell her so. All his faculties were directed to one end, to get her in safety out of that tent of death. If he could only do that, and thus show others the path to safety, help might still be obtained in time, even for those miserable wretches in the wild beasts' paws.

Meanwhile he did not see what end would be gained by telling her that the Hippodrome of the New Century was being turned, in more senses than one, into a shambles; if she could not guess it for herself, then surely this was a case in which ignorance was bliss. But, all at once, she saw something which gave her a clue, or she understood the meaning

of what people were screaming, of that horrid din, of the look on his own face, and, before he had the least expectation of what was about to happen, she was clinging to him in a sort of frenzy, shrieking like a thing possessed:

"The lions! the lions! save me from the lions!"

At that moment the hippopotamus came lumbering past them, actually grazing against her as it went. If he had not swept her off her feet she would have been under the great brute's. So soon as he had her in his arms he felt her go all limp: he looked at her; she had fainted. The unannounced items on the programme of the evening's entertainment had been too much for Dollie Lee.

As he observed her, motionless, silent, helpless in his grasp, seemingly already dead—wholly unlike the creature of life and laughter whom he had once known too well—the comment which he made beneath his breath was sufficiently grim.

Holding her above his head as if she were a child—and, indeed, in physique, she was a child compared to him—he strode towards the side of the ring. He clambered up over the benches. As calmly and quietly as if he had no special cause for concern he laid her on the uppermost bench. There, unfortunately, the smoke was worse than below. He divested himself of the fantastic sash he was wearing, stretching it over her face, with the idea of protecting her in some degree from the choking fumes. Then, standing upright, he dashed the sole of his heavy boot against the boards in front of him. It went through them as if they had been paper; indeed, such unexpectedly slight resistance did they offer that it was with difficulty he preserved his own balance. There was a rent through which a man might have thrust his head.

Kneeling, he began to take advantage of the aperture thus made to tear away the surrounding woodwork with his hands. Presently there was an aperture some six or seven feet in diameter, through which three or four persons could pass together with ease. The smoke was getting worse and worse. He kept his mouth closed, breathing as little as possible through his nostrils. Whatever efforts they might be making outside to keep the fire down did not seem to be meeting with much success. Tongues of flame kept darting into the circus in a fashion which made it wonderful that the whole place was not already in a blaze. Probably it was because they had not yet succeeded in reaching a vulnerable point, but the time

would come, and come quickly. Then there would be a holocaust indeed.

A bowie knife, slung in a case to his belt, formed part of his costume as Bull's Eye. He drew the knife, slashing the canvas which was beyond the woodwork, slitting it open as far as he could reach both above and below him. The fresh air which came through the incision was the sweetest he had ever tasted. It seemed that his proceedings were being observed by people without. When he looked out his appearance was greeted by a roar of voices. He bawled to them in French:

"Cut the canvas open! Tear the woodwork down! People are being burned alive, devoured by tigers. Don't stand there doing nothing: every moment wasted means that more lives are being lost!"

He saw that people were beginning to move about, apparently doing as he suggested.

When he returned his head inside the circus he found that Dollie Lee, having recovered consciousness, was sitting up, staring at him with something in her eyes which was beyond his comprehension.

"Quick! give me your hand! I'll lift you out; then you'll be safe; but there's no time to spare."

Instead of doing as he bade her she shrank away from him, holding back her skirts as if to keep them from the pollution of his touch.

"I won't come near you!—I won't! You are—you are some dreadful thing! I'd sooner die than you should touch me."

Her change of mood was so unexpected—she spoke with such singular vehemence—that, for a moment, he was speechless. Then he laughed, swift, as it was his wont to be, to see humour in a seemingly mirthless situation.

"I don't wish to touch you. Jump without my assistance if you prefer it; only jump. Get out of this you shall."

"Then stand on one side! I tell you again that I would sooner burn than let you touch me."

"That's right, missy; you've found him out, I see. Don't let him touch you. Didn't I say he'd murder you if he could only get the chance to do it."

This was Sam Tebb, who came scrambling towards them over the benches. Evidently he had suffered in freeing himself from the unwelcome attentions of the panic-stricken people.

His attire was all in disorder, his face was scratched and bruised, but his mood had not improved, nor did the sight of him sweeten George Otway's temper either.

"Tebb, if you come here, or again attempt to interfere in what is no concern of yours, this time I'll make you regret it."

He still held the bowie in his hand. Sam pretended to think that he was brandishing it at him.

"Knife me, would you, you murdering skunk! Don't you think you'll frighten me with that. Don't you be afraid for me, missy; he's one of the sort that's only dangerous to women. You give me your hand—you trust yourself to me—I'll see you're safe."

George Otway stood aside. Tebb came lumbering up to them, breathless but triumphant. Just then what had been threatening took place—the flames caught hold of the tent itself. A stream of fire ran, like a living thing, up the woodwork to the roof. With a rapidity which seemed miraculous it traversed the entire surface, leaping from side to side, crackling as it went, until, with the increase of volume, the sound became a roar, and the entire roof was one great blaze.

"Hurry! make haste!" cried Dollie Lee, whom this sudden transformation scene had plainly disconcerted. "Give me your hand. Help me out before it's too late."

She held out her hand to Tebb, who, making as if to take it, blundered against Otway. Apparently feigning to believe that he was in the way, he thrust out his shoulder towards George, endeavouring, with all his force, to hurl him backwards down the benches towards the ring. Had he succeeded, for Otway the consequences might have been serious. But he did not succeed. His intended victim proved to be planted more firmly on his feet than he had bargained for.

The sublimest patience knows an end at last; there had come an end to Otway's. When he perceived what—without the slightest provocation—the dastard would have done, he took him by the throat with his two hands and, standing as he did on the tier of seats above him, lifted him bodily by the neck. Whirling him round, he flung him through the air as far from him as he could.

Then he turned to Dollie Lee, his manner showing that, this time, he meant business.

"No more nonsense, if you please. Come here!"

Taking her in his arms, without asking for her yea or nay,

he sprang with her through the torn canvas into the darkness beyond. The leap was greeted by the crowd without with salvoes of applause. He had to descend—with the girl in his arms—some twelve or fourteen feet before he reached the ground. It was strange that he landed with so little damage as he did; for, even as he was passing through the air, he felt her fingers assail his face, evidently bent—regardless of the danger to herself—on doing him as much mischief as she could. Under such conditions, while he endeavoured to baulk her in her apparent desire to thrust out his eyes with her finger-nails, it was no wonder that, as he alighted, he should have stumbled, and that, in attempting to right himself, he should have let her slip from his grasp.

The slip was nothing; he had her on her feet again almost as soon as she came in contact with the ground. Yet she assailed him like a wild cat.

"You threw me down! You did it on purpose, you coward! you unspeakable thing!" she screamed, in a voice which he would never have recognised as Dollie Lee's. "He shot at me just now, and tried to kill me; now he has tried to kill me again!"

George Otway had to retain her slender wrists tightly in his strong hands to prevent her flying at him tooth and nail.

"You lie, and you know it; but if I had killed you I should have used you no worse than you deserved."

Someone else came leaping through the cut canvas—Sam Tebb.

As he reached the ground the flames burst through the top of the tent with a roar as of many waters, illumining the darkness as with an unholy light. With a cry of dismay the crowd surrounding it fell back. Almost in the same instant the whole circus collapsed like a house of cards, with a rushing, swirling, thunderous noise, which those who heard it would never forget, mingled, as it was, with the shrieks of human beings and the cries of wild beasts.

While Otway—half beside himself with the horror of the thing—was wondering what could be done to save from that awful hecatomb the men, women, and children who were being consumed to ashes, someone caught him by the arm. It was Sallie Price.

"Come farther back, you'll be burned yourself if you don't take care. I've got your things; here they are, all but

the pocket-book. Sam Tebb's got that; I saw him steal it."

"Saw me steal it, did you? But perhaps you don't know he stole it first."

Tebb held above his head the wallet which contained the bank-notes which had once been Ebenezer Pullen's, bellowing, with the full force of his stentorian voice:

"This man is Jacob Gunston; he's wanted in England on a charge of murder. There's a price upon his head, in my hand I have the proof of it. Who'll help me hold him fast till the police can come and hold him in safe custody?"

Otway looked at the speaker, and even then he smiled.

"So that's the bee you've had in your bonnet all night, is it, Sam Tebb? If you take my advice you'll be wiser than you seem, and—give me that pocket-book."

"I'll see you——!"

The conclusion of the sentence was a volley of curses.

"Is that the tone you take? It's done me no good, Ebenezer Pullen's legacy, but, at least, it shall do me no further harm."

Snatching the pocket-book from between Tebb's fingers he threw it from him so that it fell almost in the centre of the burning circus. Sam leaped at him, with an oath.

"I'll pay you for that; you shall go after it."

"I think not."

Dollie Lee urged Sam to deeds of daring.

"Kill him!" she cried. "If you kill him I'll give you a thousand pounds."

"I'll do my best to earn the money, missy."

"But you won't succeed."

Otway, lifting Tebb from his feet, was about to throw him, when, making a herculean effort, Sam regained his equilibrium, and, locked in each other's grip, the pair went spinning round, until, Otway seeming to trip over some unnoticed obstacle, the two men vanished in the flaming fiery furnace.

CHAPTER XXIX

SALLIE PRICE

"I DO believe he's coming back to life."

Miss Sallie Price perhaps spoke louder than she thought. George Otway, lying in his bed. opened his eyes as if in answer to her words. He glanced about him in meditative fashion; then he looked at her, and he said:

"I believe I am."

Whereupon Miss Price's behaviour was singular. She dropped, rather than sat down, on the chair which was by the bedside; she put her handkerchief up to her eyes, and she burst out crying. Otway regarded her in silence for some moments, as if he wondered what she was doing. Then he asked:

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm so happy."

It was possibly because he regarded the answer as in some degree illogical that he held his peace. Lying quite still he watched her, as if puzzled; then his eyes went round the room again, then back to her. It might have been because it seemed to her that his gaze contained a question that she exclaimed, between her sobs:

"I thought that you were never coming back."

"Back?" He echoed the word as if in doubt as to its meaning. "Where have I been?"

"I don't know. Where do people go when they are lying between life and death?"

"I see. I've been ill."

"I should think you have been ill. I hope, for your own sake, you'll never know how ill you've been. You've been—awful."

He appeared to be groping in the hiding-places of his mind for a key to the situation.

"Burnt; haven't I been burnt? I seem to have been seeing so many flames."

"I shouldn't wonder. You were more than half burnt if you weren't quite. When we got you and Sam Tebb out of that flaming fiery circus you were like two cinders. I never thought you'd come back to life again, but you have."

"Sam Tebb?" He pronounced the name as if he were endeavouring to associate it with something which would endow it with definite meaning. "I remember—the Circus King—Brown—the Hippodrome of the New Century—wasn't it burnt?"

"I should think it was, to dust and ashes."

"And what has become of Tebb?"

"He's alive; but that's about all he is, and that's more than he deserves to be. He's a bad lot, if ever there was one; it's through him you're where you are. They do say he'll never again be the man he was—there's an end of his pillar days—one leg's charred all to nothing."

There was another pause, then another question.

"Where am I?"

Miss Price's tone, as she replied, seemed to become, all at once, unnecessarily aggressive.

"Where are you? Why, where do you think you are? Where do you suppose you ought to be? You couldn't have gone to that cockloft of yours you called a room, not in the state you were—they wouldn't have taken you in. So I had you brought to my place—it's handiest and most convenient—and here you're going to stop till you feel like going down the stairs four at a time."

"And how do you manage?"

"Oh, first rate; what do you think? There's a cupboard that's half as big as some houses; it's a splendid place to sleep in."

"Is it?" Otway asked the question with a dryness which lent it peculiar point. "How long have I been here?"

"Getting on for six weeks now."

She said this glibly, as if six weeks were so short a period of time as to be really not worth mentioning. But if she had said six years the statement could scarcely have had a more surprising effect upon George Otway. He opened his eyes to their widest extent and stared.

"Six weeks! Do you mean to say that for six weeks I've been in possession of your quarters?"

"Well, what's wrong? If you're here six months I tell you

you sha'n't stir out of them till you can go down the stairs four at a time?"

"But, my dear Miss Price——"

"Don't you call me Miss Price! I won't have that; you call me Sallie."

"Who's been footing the bills? Because I'd no money, unless my memory fails me."

"Then your memory does fail you, because you'd the better part of two louis."

"Two louis! All the ingenuity in the world wouldn't stretch two louis over six weeks. Besides, haven't I had a doctor?"

"Of course you've had a doctor; what rubbish are you talking? I know a bit about a good many things, but I don't pretend to know how to bring a man who's been turned into a cinder back to life again. But this sort of thing won't do. You've been out of your senses for six weeks, and now, if you go chattering away like this, you'll be out of them again in less than no time. You turn over and go to sleep this minute; you're under my orders, and I'll soon let you know it."

With every appearance of meekness he suffered her to place him with his face to the wall. Since, for a whole minute, he said nothing, the presumption was that, on her instructions, he was going to sleep—a presumption, however, which he presently dispelled by addressing her in the very mildest possible tone of voice.

"Sallie!"

"Well? Didn't I tell you to go to sleep? I thought you were asleep by now."

"Has a lady called to see me or to make inquiries?"

"Do you mean Mrs Frank Andrews?"

"Mrs—who?"

Apparently her question so startled him that he turned half round in bed and sat up upon his elbows.

"How dare you upset the whole bed when I've just arranged you comfortably? I shall have more trouble with you yet, I can see that plainly. Mrs Frank Andrews was the name upon her card; that's all I know, for I saw it myself. Mrs Frank Andrews, High Dene, Sussex; 24 Carlton House Terrace, W.; and Dunslane Castle, N.B., all those addresses were upon the one card."

So Dollie Lee had married his cousin Frank, who owed

everything he had in this world to him, George Otway; they had consummated their treachery. More, they were in undisputed ownership of all the glories which were his—his houses, his millions. And he was lying there, hunted, helpless, penniless; a dependent on the charity of the Greatest Bender the World has ever seen, soft-hearted Sallie Price. If, when Brown's Circus was burning, Dollie had detected in Bull's Eye—in the man who was doing his best to save her life—even a dim resemblance to the man she had so foully wronged, that was the explanation of her sudden venom. Once the mistress of his millions, he thought it extremely probable that she was the sort of girl who would dare and do anything to retain her hold of them.

Sallie's words suggested that in so thinking he was not far wrong.

"She tried at your old place, and when she found that you weren't there she did her best to discover where you'd got to; but, as she didn't seem to mean no good to you, I put a spoke or two in her wheel and stopped her. She stayed in the town four days, then she went; but I shouldn't be surprised if she's told somebody to keep an eye on you and let her know if you're found. She certainly doesn't seem to be a friend of yours."

There was an interval of silence before he spoke again.

"Has anything been seen of the pocket-book containing bank-notes which I threw into the fire to save it from Sam Tebb?"

"Nothing, so far as I know; and, so far as I'm concerned, I'm glad."

There was something in her tone which caused him to turn towards her again.

"Why are you glad?"

It was an instant or two before she answered.

"Because I believe that they mean trouble, those bank-notes in that pocket-book. I'm not only thinking of what I heard Sam Tebb say, though that was enough to make me think, I've heard enough about them from you since you've been ill."

"Have I——" he stopped, as if to consider what form the question had better take, "have I been—talking?"

She laughed, an odd, dissonant laugh.

"Talking!—I'll be straight with you—I always have been straight, and I always will be—you've been doing nothing else

but talk. While I've been sitting by your bed, listening to what, I daresay, you'd sooner have cut your tongue out than talked to me about, I've felt mean; almost, like, as if I were listening at a keyhole. But what could I do? I couldn't go and wait outside till you had finished; I daren't leave you a moment for fear of what you'd be up to. It would have been no use stuffing cotton-wool into my ears, I'd have heard you through all the cotton-wool that ever was. So I just said to myself that directly you came to I'd tell you I'd been listening, so now you know."

Miss Price spoke with a heat which seemed to afford her patient amusement. Something like the ghost of a smile flickered across his wan features.

"And what have I been talking about? Nothing very dreadful, I hope."

"I don't know what you haven't been talking about. I've said to myself, lots of times, that it was all just sheer midsummer madness; the sort of stuff one would talk when one was light-headed. And then all of a sudden you'd say something which made me wonder if it was all such rubbish after all."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, you should have heard the way you've been talking about money—you might have been rolling in it, like Lord Rothschild or that there Mr Morgan. Once you said: 'I'm willing that it should cost me two hundred and fifty thousand pounds'; as if it wasn't a quarter as many farthings. It was some sort of a house you seemed to be talking about; but what sort of a house it would be that would cost all that amount of money is more than I can say."

Otway remembered that two hundred and fifty thousand pounds had been the sum he had originally intended to expend upon High Dene, though that amount had been considerably exceeded by the time the place was ready for occupation.

"And then you talked about a girl."

"What girl?"

"You called her Dollie. The way you've gone on about her! Sometimes that fond; and sometimes—oh, my gracious! that brimstoney! If she'd been here it'd have scorched her just to hear you talking!"

"We'll leave alone the remarks I made about a girl called Dollie. Was that all I talked about?"

Miss Price, who had crossed to the other side of the room, was standing with her back towards the bed. She was arranging some odds and ends upon a little table, almost as if she were endeavouring to gain time for reflection before she answered.

"I wish it had been."

This time there was that in the fashion of her speech which seemed to have the effect of keeping him still; apparently she read that in his silence which tied a knot in her tongue. It was with something like a catching in her breath that, when the pause had extended to an uncomfortable length, she repeated her own words.

"I wish it had been all you talked about."

The repetition prompted him to question her.

"Why do you say that again?"

She replied to his inquiry with another—turning towards the bed to ask it.

"What do you know of Jacob Gunston?"

Possibly the query was one for which he had been prepared, and he answered unhesitatingly:

"Very little."

His answer seemed to move her to something very like anger.

"Don't say that when I had to listen to you for the last six weeks. Mary Renwick is my cousin."

"Mary Renwick? Indeed. I'm afraid I don't know the lady."

His answer seemed to surprise her more than anything which had hitherto been said.

"You don't know Mary Renwick! She was engaged to Jacob Gunston!"

"Now I think I begin to understand. Mary Renwick is the young lady who has been causing so much trouble."

"Mary Renwick causing trouble! Jacob Gunston is a murderer; he deceived her besides. What I've suffered, knowing what I do know, having to stand here and hear you talk, no tongue can tell. Tell me—don't be afraid to tell the truth; you won't come to any hurt from me anyhow; only tell the truth—are you Jacob Gunston?"

"I am not; and for one sufficient reason if for no other, Jacob Gunston is dead."

"Jacob Gunston dead! What do you mean? How do you know? When did he die?"

"That I cannot exactly tell you, lying here; but it seems to me to be years ago. He committed suicide by jumping into the Thames over Southwark Bridge."

"But—he was alive just before you came to Rouen."

"Pardon me; I was alive—not Jacob Gunston. That's where Mary Renwick—a lady with whom I have no sort of acquaintance, has been causing trouble. Knowing nothing at all about the real circumstances she has been acting on the presumption that I am Jacob Gunston; whereas I happen to be George Otway."

"George Otway! Not the millionaire?"

"The same man."

"My gracious! No wonder you talked about two hundred and fifty thousand pounds as if it was nothing. But—how came you to Rouen—to be mixed up with the Circus King; to be Bull's Eye?"

"It's a long story; one day, perhaps, you shall hear it all. It had a good deal to do with the lady you heard me speak about as Dollie, and who is now, it seems, Mrs Frank Andrews, my cousin's wife."

"I knew it! I was sure of it! I said to myself that whatever else might have got you in a mess she has had most to do with it."

"That chapter in my life's shut down. Some day I may continue writing it. If I do, by the time I've finished it that lady and I may be able to cry quits. I'm afraid she's even a more curious character than I thought she was, and I credited her with a good deal of singularity."

He was silent, and she also. She was fidgeting here and there about the room in a style that was scarcely characteristic, as if conscious that an unspoken question was trembling on he tip of his tongue, the asking of which she was desirous of postponing to the latest possible moment. All at once it came, as if timidly.

"Was there anything else I talked about?"

"What should there have been?"

"That is what I am asking you. You say I talked about all manner of nonsense."

"You did."

This curtly; as if, for her part, she should prefer to consider the subject closed. But he persevered.

"Did I mention any other lady's name?"

"You seem to have had to do with a good many ladies in your time."

As if depressed by the snub thus brusquely administered he lay quite still, until, as if conscious-stricken by the contemplation of her own severity, Miss Price said, with an ostentatious air of complete indifference which seemed more than a trifle forced:

"You said something about a Miss Thornton—I believe it was her you spoke about as Elsie."

Otway drew a long breath and closed his eyes. They were still closed when he spoke again.

"She seems to have been with me all the time."

Miss Price's tone, as she replied, was distinctly tart.

"So I should think, by the way that you've kept on about her—about your being in a boat with her, and on an island, and I don't know what."

"She's in some great trouble; I've seemed to hear her calling to me all the time. I must go and help her."

"Then you just won't; not yet a while, at any rate. The idea! Why, you couldn't stand up straight to save your life. What sort of trouble do you suppose she's in?"

"She's in the hands of wicked men and women, wholly at their mercy—I daren't think."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know, I can't tell. I hear her voice calling to me, but I can't make out where it comes from—sometimes it seems so close and sometimes so far away. But I shall know soon; soon she will tell me just where she is, and then I shall go to her."

"Oh, will you? Then it won't be soon, I can tell you; if you're not more manageable I shouldn't be surprised if it's never. You keep on talk, talk, talking, when you're so weak that you can scarcely hold yourself together. I don't want to stop in Rouen for the rest of my life; so, as I don't mean to go until I've seen you out of it, perhaps you'll do your best to get well at once. Turn over now, and go to sleep like a good child."

He obeyed her with a tractability which in itself was eloquent of the state that he was in. He was still so long that she was beginning to think that he actually had gone to sleep, when he spoke again.

"Sallie?"

"Well; what's the matter now?"

"Are you out of an engagement?"

"Bless the man, what a question to ask! How can I be in an engagement when I'm here in Rouen nursing you?"

"But how do you manage, when it's all going out and nothing coming in?"

"You don't suppose I've been as long in the front rank of the profession as I have without putting by something for a rainy day? I'm not a spendthrift to that extent, I do hope. Don't you worry about me, I've got what's as good as the Bank of England to draw upon. All you've got to do is to get well as fast as ever you can, and faster! It'll be one of the happiest days in my life, the one on which I see you running downstairs just as you used to be able to: I'll be that proud to think that I had a hand in helping you to do it."

"Sallie, you're a dear, good soul; you won't find me ungrateful when I come to be myself again, if I ever do!"

"If you ever do! What do you mean by sighing like that? If you choose you'll be yourself again inside a week, and you'll best show your gratitude by choosing. Now, will you go to sleep?"

That time he went to sleep without another word. After a few minutes of complete silence she leaned over his bed and looked at him. He was sleeping as peacefully as a child, breathing softly and regularly, smiling as he slept. That smile of his seemed to cause her to knit her brows.

"He's dreaming of Elsie; that's why he's smiling. He's dreaming that he's happy, at last, with her."

She sighed, as if the idea of his happiness did not convey to her mind any too pleasant associations. She smoothed a crease out of the sheet with a gentle touch.

"So I'm a dear, good soul, am I? and I sha'n't find him ungrateful. It does sound funny. I'm a practical sort of creature, I ought to be if I'm not; but the castles that once I started building! How he would laugh if I told him about them, he'd see how comical it was. To think of his being George Otway, the great George Otway!—and I, Sallie Price the Bender! I'd have hit anybody who'd have told me that I should one day be ashamed of being a bender, but when I think of what he is—and how he must look down on girls like me—I am. A pretty sort that Dollie of his must be, Mrs Frank Andrews! To my mind she's got her character written

on her face; he's mistaken if he fancies it'll be easy to get the better of her. If he gives her so much as a ghost of a chance she'll land him in a worse hole than he's in already—he fights fair, she doesn't. I wonder what sort that Elsie is. I don't suppose she deserves him—I don't believe any woman alive could do that—but I do hope, for his sake, that she's better than that—beauty."

Having made certain that he was sound asleep she went to a wooden box which stood in a corner of the room, and, having unlocked it, extracted from its deepest depths a small tin box. When she had unlocked that also she proceeded to inspect its contents. To judge from her manner they did not afford her unmixed gratification. They consisted, for the most part, of money, but the whole amount was so small that she regarded it with an air which, the more she looked, the more woebegone it became. She counted and recounted it again and again, in the apparent hope of detecting herself in an error, but the sum total remained obstinately the same. Its insignificance seemed to appal her.

"That's the Bank of England I told him I'd got to draw upon, my goodness! The Bank of England doesn't seem to be keeping a very large balance in its vaults just now. It did seem a good deal when I started; I know it took me a good long time to get it all together; I'll never get as much again, never! But—how it's melted! I only hope that it'll last as long as it's wanted to. I don't wish to have to sell anything. A girl like me finds it easier to sell things than to buy 'em. I do hope it'll last till he gets his strength and is able to do for himself; it'll be a bad job for me if it doesn't. If it does, I sha'n't mind."

Having once turned the corner of the road which led to recovery George Otway's progress was rapid, and yet, it would seem, not fast enough for his nurse. He gradually became conscious that her anxiety for the complete restoration of his health was even greater than his. One morning he asked her.

"Why are you so desperately desirous to get me up and away? I can see you are. Be honest, Sallie. Is there any special reason? And who is that with whom you are so constantly holding confabulations outside the door?"

"That's Jeanne Duclos."

"And who may Jeanne Duclos happen to be?"

"She's the girl who has the next apartment; she's been very

good while you've been ill. She has done all my shopping and errands, and—helped to hide you."

"Helped to hide me? What do you mean?"

"There's bills all over Rouen offering a reward to anyone who finds out where you are."

"Bills all over Rouen, Sallie!"

"I believe that Mrs Frank Andrews has done it all. She's paying everything for Sam Tebb, and she herself offered me a hundred pounds if I would tell her where you could be found."

"But of what use would that information be to her?"

"That's more than I can tell you; you ought to know if anyone does. I know she's given it out all over the place that you're Jacob Gunston, and that you're wanted by the English police for murder."

"Has she? I owe that to Mr Tebb. Although I do not happen to be Jacob Gunston, as she is probably well aware, I do not wish to come into contact with the police just yet."

"That's what I thought, and that's why I've been hiding you. Jeanne Duclos and I are the only two people who know you're even alive; without her I don't know what I should have done."

"I should like to see this Jeanne Duclos."

"That's easy. Although you did not know it, you saw her often enough when you were light-headed. She's in her apartment now. I'll fetch her this moment if you'll lie still."

Although she went to fetch her he did not lie still. On the contrary, no sooner was she out of the room than he was out of the bed. He proposed to try an experiment.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "if I could manage to stand."

So he put the matter to the proof, and learnt that, at present, such a feat was beyond his power. His legs showed a tendency to double up as soon as he relied on them for support, while the room went swimming round him in a fashion which was not a little disconcerting. He sank back on to the edge of his bed, feeling more physically strange than he had ever done in the whole course of his life. As he sat there, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or heels, suddenly he heard someone call to him by name.

"George Otway!"

Not loudly, but most distinctly, the words came to him. Startled, he looked about the room, searching for the speaker.

"Yes," he answered. "Who wants me? who spoke?"

No one vouchsafed the information, and there was apparently no one from whom it could have come. For a moment he supposed the thing to have been a delusion born of his mental and physical weakness. But, all at once, it came again—louder, more distinct than before.

"George Otway!"

On the instant he understood. It was the voice which had been calling to him through all these weary weeks, the voice which had called to him that night in the wood: it was Elsie's voice. Her extremity of need had continued all this time, yet he had been able to do nothing to help her. She had cried to him continually for aid, and cried in vain. How long was she to appeal to him for what, perchance, was dearer to her than life, and he, perforce, keep still?

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE WINDOW

WHEN Miss Price returned she found him sitting on the edge of the bed, trembling like a child.

"Didn't I tell you," she exclaimed, "to lie still? What do you mean by getting up like this directly my back was turned?"

"She called to me," he said, in what, in the extremity of his weakness, was almost like a childish whimper. "She called."

"She called? Who's she?"

"Elsie! She's always calling to me for help, and I can give her none."

"No; and you never will be able to, either, if you won't obey orders and behave like a rational being. Back you go into bed this moment."

And back he did go, almost before he knew it, she tucking him up and making him generally comfortable, with a business-like vigour which was more soothing than he was capable of owning.

"Can't leave you a moment but you're in some mischief. I suppose if I'd been a second longer you'd have been trying to break your neck by tumbling down the stairs."

She called attention to the girl who had followed her into the room; a young woman of twenty-four or five—by no means ill-looking—of the honest, stalwart, Norman type.

"This is Jeanne Duclos; you wanted to see her, and here she is; there isn't a better girl in the whole of France."

"Oh, Mademoiselle Sallie!"

"I say there isn't; and don't you mademoiselle me." Miss Price addressed herself to Otway. "Now, how are you feeling?"

"Thank you, better. If I could only get to Elsie when she calls!"

"You'll have to get somewhere soon, and that's straight;

and that's what I've brought Jeanne in here to tell. What's that, Jeanne, you were telling me about the sergent-de-ville of yours?"

Thus invited, Mademoiselle Duclos started off in English which, if idiomatic, was pleasant and sufficiently comprehensible.

"My cousin, Pierre Bompard, is sergent-de-ville. He says to me this morning: 'We know where is that Englishman, that Jacob Gunston, whom all the world is looking for. He thinks himself very clever; but before twenty-four hours are past we will have him under arrest, for certain."

"And what is that about someone coming from England?"

"He says also, Pierre Bompard, that an agent of police arrives to take Jacob Gunston back with him to England."

"So you see," went on Miss Price, speaking to her patient, "I'm in a bit of a hole. I don't want to start you off when you're not fit to put a foot to the ground; but, at the same time, I don't want them to come and arrest you in your bed."

"Do you think there's any real danger of their doing anything of the kind?"

"I don't want to think it—and I've tried not to—but I'm afraid there is. For one thing, I don't believe Sam Tebb is so near death's door as I fancied; and, if that's the case, I shouldn't be surprised if he's given them the office as to whereabouts you may be found."

"Pierre Bompard, he say to me: 'Mademoiselle Sallie, she know where is Jacob Gunston.'"

"When I heard that," admitted Sallie, "I went hot and cold all over. I'll swear that Sam Tebb's finger is showing there. And there's been somebody hanging about this street the last day or two whose looks I don't fancy at all."

"He is a spy; for sure he is a spy."

"So, you see, it's this way. Jeanne here is going to play a game of her own which will put them off the scent for a day or two—perhaps three or four—but we can't be certain. So—although I hate to have to do it!—it seems only fair to warn you that, unless you want to be caught in a trap, you'll have to be ready to clear out of this, at a moment's notice, fit or unfit."

"Thank you for giving me the warning; it's another mite added to the debt of gratitude I owe you already. I think, also, that what you've told me will act on me like an excellent

medicine. I've no intention of allowing Sam Tebb to score at my expense, or Mrs Frank Andrews either. I'll begin to put on strength so fast that in less than no time you won't know me for the same man; so that when the moment does come I'll be able to let them find me missing."

On the afternoon of the third day after this conversation George Otway was lying in that condition of being neither awake nor asleep, which is one of the pleasantest attributes of the state of convalescence, when he had what, if it were a dream, was the most realistic he had ever dreamed.

He was walking in Paris: he knew it was Paris, because, as he walked, someone kept whispering in his ear, as if to impress the fact on his mind:

"This is Paris! this is Paris!"

Presently he came to a street called the Rue du Bois. As if to render it impossible for him to forget that that was the name of the street, something seemed to stop him and to call his attention to the mural tablet on which was inscribed Rue du Bois. When he had thoroughly digested that fact he passed on down the street on the left-hand side. So far as their exterior went, the houses were of good size and decent enough; yet, as he went by them he was oppressed by the feeling that there was something evil in the air. Although there was nobody but himself in sight he was conscious of voices shouting to him. Though he did not understand what they were saying he knew that they were warning him against some danger which threatened more and more each step that he advanced. Paying no heed to them, he went on and on.

The street was a long one. He had gone more than half way down it, always on the left side, when he came to a house in front of which he stopped, as if constrained by some irresistible force. The house was of the same pattern as the rest; he would have said that there was nothing to distinguish it from its fellows had not his eye all at once been caught by a fragment of red curtain which was fluttering through an open window on the uppermost floor; he told himself that he should always know it again because of that red curtain. Moving downwards his glance settled on the huge door. Suspended to it, apparently by nails, as if she had been crucified, was Elsie Thornton. He knew that she was dead, in spite of the fact that she was looking at him with wide-open

eyes which seemed to congeal the blood in his body. The agony that was in her face! the expression of unspeakable pain! and the reproach! As, riveted to the ground, he stood and gazed at her, from the dead lips came words:

"If you had only come when I called you I should be still alive."

Suddenly he found himself wide awake, with those words still sounding in his ears. What did it mean? Had he been awake or dreaming? Had this vision, if vision it was, been sent to him as a token and a sign? How plainly, even in the bright sunlight of his room, could he see the oblong tablet against the wall—Rue du Bois, the shadowed street, the fluttering scrape of red streaming from the window far down the road on the side on which he was. She had called to him, and called; he had never known from whence the call had come. Was it indeed a vision he had had? and did it mean that Elsie Thornton was in the Rue du Bois, in a house with a red curtain, in frightful need of help from him?

Where was the Rue du Bois? In Paris? He knew his Paris pretty well, but nothing of a Rue du Bois. What did it matter? He would go to Paris, if possible, within the hour; then, if there was a Rue du Bois, what strange mercy, unknown to man's philosophy, had been shown to him? Surely the interpretation of this thing was that, if he hastened, he would still be in time; but, if he made no haste, after the coming of this sign, then her blood would be on his head.

To him the reflection was like the touch of a spur to a high-mettled steed.

Then and there he rose from his bed. During the last three days, as he had prophesied, his strength had returned to him quickly. Each day, with his nurse's sanction, he had risen for awhile, so that he might become accustomed again to stand on his own feet. Already he had progressed so far that he was able, with but little difficulty, to dress himself in the clothes which he had not worn since, for the last time, he had attired himself as Bull's Eye. He laughed to himself as he noted that he had grown so thin that they hung upon him as they might have done upon a scarecrow. His waistcoat was so loose that it might have been made for a man twice his size.

"There's room for filling there. In the meantime, it would fit none the worse if a reef was taken in behind."

As he spoke Sallie Price came into the room. There was

that in her manner which betokened agitation. She seemed short of breath, as if she had rushed upstairs at top speed. When she saw him standing there she broke into an exclamation, which was part amazement, part pleasure.

"So you are up, thank goodness! and dressed! What have you heard?"

"I should like to hear that there was more of me to fill this waistcoat. In the meanwhile, I should be obliged if you would take it in, or whatever the process is called, so that it might be a little more of a fit."

"There is no time for that: you must go at once."

"At once? What do you mean? Have you—have you also had a vision?"

"A vision? I don't know anything about a vision, but I believe that the police have found out where you are."

"The police?"

"The police! They may be here any moment; you must be out of this, if possible, inside ten minutes. Where will you go."

"I will go to the Rue du Bois."

"The Rue du Bois. Where's that?"

"In Paris; at least, I dreamed it was in Paris. It will take me some time to walk there. How far is it by road?"

"What are you talking about? You're not going to walk there! It's nearly a hundred miles."

"My dear Sallie, how am I to get there if I don't walk, unless someone gives me a free lift by the way, since I have no money?"

"No money! I'll soon see that you have money."

From her trunk she took the small tin box which stood to her for the Bank of England.

"Here are five Napoleons for you."

"I'll not have you: five Napoleons, I've robbed you of too much already."

"You can speak to me like that!"

"Why should I not speak to you like that when it's true, Sallie? Tell me, honestly, how much money have you left? Stay, in such a matter I'll not trust you; I believe you'd leave yourself penniless if you saw a chance of doing me a service, I'll see for myself."

He took the cash-box from her unresisting, trembling hands. She watched him, all frightened, like some guilty thing, as he ransacked its contents.

"Why, there's only a hundred and thirty francs all told, and you'd give me a hundred of them. Sallie, with what fresh crime would you saddle my conscience?"

"I can get an engagement whenever I want; I know of one now where I can open next week."

"I daresay, but you've got to get to it, and next week is some way off."

"If I get a little short I've heaps of friends to whom I've only to write, and they'll send me what I want. You shall take some, or I'll throw the lot into the street."

"I'll take ten francs."

"You shall take half of all I've got!"

"Sallie, don't let's try to quarrel, you and I, because it isn't to be done. I'll take thirty. No! it's no good. If you'll not be content with my having thirty, I'll not have one. That'll take me to Paris, and still leave me with enough to turn round. Good-bye, you best and truest friend that ever was given to a man in a hole!"

She caught his hands in both of hers, there was a sob in her voice.

"You mustn't say good-bye—not good-bye—you must tell me an address where I can find you."

"When you've an address at which you can be found, write what it is to John Lennard, Poste Restante, Paris! so soon as I have it I'll post you up in all that I've been doing."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

That evening George Otway reached Paris, tired by the railway journey—though it only took two hours—yet with grit enough left in him to enable him, at a pinch, to play the man. At the St Lazaire station he told a cabman to drive him to the Rue du Bois; wondering, with a beating heart, if, after all, the cabman would say he had never heard of such a place. Then what would there be left for him to do?

The driver hesitated, seeming to search the map of Paris which he had in his head.

"The Rue du Bois. There is a Rue du Bois in the Arrondissement de l'Observatoire; it is the only one I know, from here that is no end of a distance."

Otway's heart leapt up in his bosom.

"No matter how far it is, take me to the Rue du Bois."

As the driver had said, it proved to be "no end of a

distance"; especially did it seem so, in that ramshackle, slow-going fiacre, to the fevered, impatient man inside.

He dismissed the cab at the corner of the street. The instant he saw it he knew that he was on no fool's errand, that the vision had been indeed a token and a sign. This, beyond the faintest shadow of a doubt, was the street down which he had walked while lying on his bed that afternoon at Rouen. He tore down it now, at the top of his speed, searching eagerly the houses on the other side of the way for a window with a red curtain. He had almost reached the bottom when a window in the highest storey of the house immediately opposite was thrown wide open and a girl appeared at it, screaming, with the full force of her lungs, in accents which started him trembling like a leaf:

"George Otway! George Otway!"

She had pronounced the name twice when it seemed that someone seized her from behind and dragged her back. The window was closed almost more quickly than it had been opened. All was still.

The girl who had just called to him from the window of that house in the Rue du Bois was Elsie Thornton: she who had called to him so often he had not known from whence.

CHAPTER XXXI

DONNA LUISA REDIVIVUS

IT had happened so suddenly that for a moment or two George Otway was not quite clear in his own mind as to what exactly had occurred—the window had been opened, the girl had looked out, she had twice called upon his name, had been dragged back into the room, the window refastened, —all, it seemed to him, inside two seconds; at any rate with such surprising quickness that, before his attention had been fully roused, the incident was closed.

He remained, motionless, on the other side of the street, with his eyes fixed upon the window in question, half expecting that it would be reopened and a further scene in the drama be enacted; and his expectations did not go wholly unrealised. For, presently, the window was partially opened, an arm protruded, the *persiennes*—those Venetian shutters which are associated with every house in France—were released and drawn to, and, presto! the window had vanished, and only the shutters remained. The action was significant; evidently precautions were being taken to prevent the girl making a second appeal.

Otway arrived at an instant decision. Crossing the street he gave a vigorous pull at the bell handle which dangled against the wall. A clanging peal resounded through the courtyard on the other side of the heavy door. He waited, but no answer came. He rang again and again, and even a fourth time, before anything transpired to show that his summons had attracted the attention of those within. Then a small trap was thrown back, and a harsh feminine voice demanded, in French:

"Well, who is it? What do you mean by making all this clatter?"

Otway replied, in the same language:

"I wish to see Miss Thornton."

"And who, in the name of goodness, is Miss Thornton? There is no one of that name lives here. It is because of this

person you try to break our bell, a person of whom one has never heard!"

"If you prefer that I should use a name which certainly is not hers: I wish to see Miss Villiers."

"Miss Villiers, ah, now we advance: you speak of the poor mad girl? But no one can see Miss Villiers: she is not in a fit state to see anyone."

"She is in a fit state to see me. I insist upon your opening the door and admitting me at once!"

"Name of a dog! you insist! And, pray, who are you, that you talk as if the house were yours?"

"Never mind my name! It is enough for you that I am a friend of Miss Villiers, as you call her, and that, if you do not wish to have trouble with the police, you will instantly let me see her."

"Trouble with the police. My good man, you talk as if you aimed cannons at one's head. You will understand that this house is not mine, I am but the *concierge*. I obey orders, and only admit certain persons. If you will condescend to wait I will go and inquire if I am to admit you."

"Go, then: only make it clear to whoever you may be going that I intend to be admitted, and be so good as not to keep me long."

Muttering something beneath her breath the *concierge* withdrew, the trap was closed, and George Otway was left to cool his heels at his leisure—left longer than he relished. Seconds became minutes, it seemed to him that the minutes became many. After an interval, which appeared to him to be unduly long, he sounded another peal upon the rusty bell. Still no signs of the returning *concierge*. What might not be taking place within? What might they not be doing to Elsie while they kept him dallying at the gate? Before he gained the other side they might have put her beyond his reach. He kept up a perpetual clanging till the trap was once more thrown back and the coarse voice was heard again.

"A thousand devils! you make hubbub enough to disturb the entire neighbourhood. Do you think that at my age one rushes up and down a hundred stairs as if one was ten? For me, it is an affair to ascend to madame's apartment."

While she grumbled she unlocked the wicket—the fact that it needed unlocking was of ominous import. He found himself confronting a sturdy, ill-tempered-looking woman about forty-

five years of age, whose upper lip was ornamented with a moustache which was almost of masculine dimensions. She scowled at him from under heavy overhanging eyebrows.

"Well, my lad, you don't seem to be a person of so much importance that you should cause all this commotion. As I said to madame, if she does not wish to let you in I will soon see that you are taught to behave. Yes, I, Marie Cagnol. But, madame, she is too good-natured, she says: 'I will see this noisy person.'"

"And who is madame?"

"I ask, who are you?—you reply, it is no affair of mine. To your question I give the same answer."

She had taken him into the house, and was now leading the way up what seemed to him to be endless flights of stairs. Already fatigued by his journey he began to fear that if they had much farther to go he would have to sit and rest, and, before all else just now, he wished to conceal all signs of physical weakness. As it was, he had to momentarily pause to take breath.

"This madame of yours lives, then, at the top of the house? Is it necessary that one should mount for ever?"

"What does it matter to you where she lives? If you had wished that she should live on the ground-floor you should have told her so. Did I not say to you that one does not rush up and down a hundred stairs? Now you see for yourself how it is."

As she said this she turned to him with a grin which was distinctly not a pleasant one. She rapped with her knuckles at the panels of the door in front of which she had paused, then opened it to speak to someone within: "Here, madame, is the individual who will not give his name, but who talks of trouble with the police if I refuse to admit him." Suddenly she discovered that the room had no occupant. "Ah, madame is not here. Enter, then. No doubt madame will be with you in a minute, if you will only have the condescension to take a chair and to wait."

Acting on her suggestion he entered. The moment he was in the door was closed, and he heard what sounded singularly like the slipping of a bolt. Filled with a new suspicion he tried the handle. The door refused to budge.

"Outside there, open this door at once! What do you mean by fastening me in?"

The only reply was a slight noise which might have been a chuckle. He shook the door again and shouted a second time. This time there was not even a chuckle. He looked about him. The room was brilliantly lit by electric bulbs. On one side were three windows shaded by curtains. Drawing the hangings aside from one of them he was about to open it to learn what was without when he became conscious of a sound behind him and turned to find that a second door, of whose existence he had been unaware, had been opened on the other side of the room, and that a woman had entered.

He stared at her in silence, knowing he had seen her before, yet unable for the moment to say just where. She, on her part, was silent too, regarding him, steadfastly, with a smile, which was rather a sneer, which he instinctively resented. That she did not need even momentary consideration to recall who he was, was obvious.

"So, Mr Lennard, we meet again."

So soon as she spoke he knew her: she was Madame O'Callaghan, the wife of young David Curtis's chance acquaintance, Major O'Callaghan. It was only because he was still not quite himself that he had not recognised her on the instant. She was the woman who, coming with Elsie Thornton into the room of that house in Sefton Park, had introduced her as Lottie Villiers, the woman who had filled him with such a sense of repugnance, who had lied to him, who, above all, had whisked Elsie away from underneath his very nose. If he had only had his wits about him it was her appearance which he would have been expecting. No wonder that she greeted him with a combination of a smile and a sneer.

Seeing that he still kept silence she continued, endowing what seemed innocuous words with some venomous quality as she uttered them:

"The pleasure of meeting you again was one which I thought it not improbable would fall to my lot. Indeed, I had rather expected that our acquaintance would have been renewed before this."

"It is not my fault that it has not been."

"No? your misfortune? That is rather prettily put."

"You omitted to furnish me with your address so that I might hand it to the police."

"Did I, indeed? What a singular omission. Very careless conduct on my part, wasn't it?"

Advancing farther into the room she placed herself in a position in which she could see him more to her advantage. The shabbiness of his attire; his generally dishevelled appearance; the signs of recent illness which marked not only his face but also his attenuated form seemed to occasion her surprise.

"Really, Mr Lennard, you don't look as if the world had been all lavender to you just recently. That's a shocking suit which you have on: a worse fit I never saw. It must be a generation ago since it cost even as much as fifty shillings. And surely it is years since you saw a decent barber. If I saw you, as a casual stranger in the street, I should have guessed that you had just come out of a workhouse: I give you my word that you look sufficiently ill-fed. I assure you that I should not be at all surprised to learn that the purpose of your presence here is to beg a hearty meal."

"As you know perfectly well, I am here to see Miss Thornton."

"To see whom?"

"To see Miss Thornton."

"Who is this who speaks of Miss Thornton?"

CHAPTER XXXII

ELSIE

THE question was asked by someone else who had come into the room by the door through which Madame O'Callaghan had entered; a voice which stirred his pulses with a sense of familiarity which was almost painful. When he looked to see who the speaker was he felt as if he must be in some sort of waking dream when he found himself confronted by Donna Luisa D'Agostino, the Mother of Caracas. As if to render the sense of illusion more complete she was attired, if not in the identical gown of crimson satin which had made her so conspicuous a figure on board the *Queen of the Seas*, then in one which, to his masculine eyes, seemed exactly like it. She was as huge as ever, and moved towards the centre of the room with a clumsy, awkward gait which became her as ill as her costume.

She did not appear to be so surprised to see him as he had been to see her. On the contrary, placing herself on a chair, resting her elbows on the table which was in front of her, removing the big cigar which she was smoking from between her lips, she addressed him as off-handedly as if she had only been parted from him half-an-hour before.

"So again you are an uninvited guest of mine; and what is it you call yourself this time? Are you Rothschild? or are you Pierpont Morgan?"

Instead of answering her question he made a demand.

"Donna Luisa, I have to request that you will at once allow me to see Miss Thornton."

"Ah! It is that which is the lure which has brought you." She turned to Madame O'Callaghan: "So that blunder of you and your friends may not turn out to be such an imbecility after all. It has been the misfortune of my life to have been the plaything of idiots. If, after all, one of them has been guilty of doing something sane it is a recompense which I assuredly deserve."

Madame O'Callaghan said nothing, her very silence being eloquent of the fact that the Mother of Caracas was once again the ruling spirit. Donna Luisa puffed at her cigar for a moment or two in silence. Then she spoke again to Otway.

"You will have heard that that expedition of mine failed."

"I have heard nothing."

"No? Then I now present you with the information. It failed: in the first place, because it was conducted by individuals who were—mostly—fools; the kind of fools who make a mess of everything; and, in the second place, because I, being enraged, behaved also like a fool. You will recollect that I did you the honour to propose that you should become my husband."

"I confess that I was so unreasonable as not to be enamoured with the future which you had sketched for me."

"So I imagined. What I did not expect was that you would take the line you did, or I would have taken my own precautions. When I learned that you and Miss Thornton had been sent overboard together there was a bad half-hour for certain persons on the *Queen of the Seas*."

It required no effort on Otway's part to enable him to believe that statement. At the mere recollection a look which was almost worse than murderous came into the speaker's eyes. There was an iron rigidity about the set of her jaw which suggested all sorts of unpleasant possibilities. When, after an interval, she went on, it was with a hard bitterness which, for some occult reason, seemed to make Madame O'Callaghan wince.

"I gave my instructions to certain persons that you must be found, you and Miss Thornton also. I did not care a snap of the fingers if the girl was found at the bottom of the sea, but I had set my heart on finding you alive. Judge, then, of my delight when I learn that they had found Miss Thornton, but not you. They find the girl upon what they declare to me to be an uninhabited island on which was a volcano in a state of eruption. She fights with them like a wild cat; yet they bear her away with them in triumph. Yes, in triumph!—think of it, the fools!—and of you they learn nothing, hear nothing, see nothing. I believe they were afraid of the volcano. I spent a small fortune on an expedition to discover you, and all they discover is that wretched

girl. Believe me, I am pleased. And yet it would seem as if I were to score off their blunder after all, since you have discovered yourself."

"I again ask you to allow me to see Miss Thornton."

"You shall see her, I promise you. But, as a beginning, it is necessary that you and I should come to a little understanding. By way of preface I may mention that, as I have entered, for the second time, into the bonds of holy matrimony, you need not anticipate the renewal of a certain proposition."

"I have to tender you my sincerest congratulations."

"You congratulate yourself, also, a little, eh? Well, that is by the way. I will not pretend that I have exactly the husband I would myself have chosen. There were certain circumstances which made it necessary that I should suffer him to marry me, so on that point I will say no more. I cannot, however, forget that, as your wife, I should have been in a position to do certain things which now are beyond my power. It becomes, therefore, desirable that I should place myself in a situation in which I shall possess as many as possible of the advantages which, as your wife, I should have enjoyed."

George Otway laughed outright. The calm matter-of-fact air with which Donna Luisa talked of subjects which are, in general, only delicately hinted at was not a little entertaining.

"I would again remind you that I am here to see Miss Thornton who, I have reason to fear, is being detained in this house against her will."

"I will explain as clearly as I can. If you will pay me a hundred thousand pounds you can leave this house at once, and you can take Miss Thornton with you for all I care. If not, I shall get the money from your cousin Mr Frank Andrews; and, in return, I will undertake that you shall never again be George Otway the millionaire."

"How will you prevent it?"

"For the present that does not matter. Let me assure you that I will prevent it."

Donna Luisa turned to Madame O'Callaghan.

"Ring the bell," she said.

Madame pressed an ivory push-piece. Almost simul-

taneously the door was opened, and Mr Bianchi—of the *Queen of the Seas*—came into the room. Donna Luisa addressed herself to Otway.

"This is my husband."

He nodded, smilingly.

"I guessed as much; Mr Bianchi displayed so much anxiety lest anyone else should occupy that august position. My heartiest congratulations, Mr Bianchi, on your—deserved—promotion."

Mr Bianchi was silent. He looked both sour and out of temper, as if he feared that he was being laughed at. Nor would one have guessed, from his demeanour, that he was overwhelmed with happiness at his good fortune. His wife spoke to him in the same off-hand fashion she used for everyone. Indeed, had it not been for her positive statement to the contrary, one would almost have suspected him of being her servant rather than her lord and master.

"You perceive, here is the husband you robbed me of. In spite of you and of those fools, after all, I have him. I tell him that for a hundred thousand pounds he can live, but he will not promise to give me the money."

"He is stark mad; I have always said it. You had better get the money from his cousin, Frank Andrews. He will give it to you fast enough."

"I believe that, for once, you are right. I have asked you to come here in order that there may be no misunderstanding. For the last time, Mr Otway, I have to tell you that if you will not give me the amount I require, to oblige your cousin—who will give it me, and more—you will be dead, and worse than dead."

Mr Bianchi interpolated an observation of his own.

"He will be a great deal worse than dead, I promise him that. But he is one of those pig-headed Englishmen, and mad even for an Englishman; he will not even listen to reason. You will not get him to believe that his life is in any danger till he has actually worse than lost it. You had better make an end at once and get the money the quickest way—from the cousin."

George Otway, who had been turning one or two things over in his mind, and at the same time regarding the faces in front of him, had arrived at the conclusion that he was in a delicate position. It occurred to him that it might be as well

to gain a little time in order that he might be able to study that position in all its bearings.

"Before I will enter into a discussion with you on any subject whatever I must see Miss Thornton."

The three exchanged glances. Donna Luisa spoke.

"Let him see her. What does it matter? He is in our hands. Ring again."

Once more Madame O'Callaghan pressed the push-piece. This time there entered four men. In two of them Otway recognised Major O'Callaghan and Mr Howard, of the house in Sefton Park; in the other two he fancied he recalled members of the motley crowd which was on board the *Queen of the Seas*. The major greeted him with an affable movement of his hand.

"Ho! my old friend Lennard. And how is my friend Curtis? Still willing to give lessons in poker? Our parting on the last occasion of our meeting was so abrupt that I really had not time to say good-bye; I trust he's going as strong as ever."

Otway did not answer. He regarded the speaker with a look which, if looks could scorch, would have scorched him there and then. He turned to the woman who seemed to have this curious collection of persons at her beck and call.

"Donna Luisa, I did not think that, in your retinue, you numbered quite such scum of the earth as this man represents. He is a card-sharper, a pander, and a thief. I must ask you not to permit him to address himself to me. I shall certainly give him no answer if he does."

The Mother of Caracas made a little eccentric movement with her cigar.

"I have already told you that I am not always able to choose my own society. I do not vouch for the characters of all the persons who are in my service. Sometimes, the worse their characters the better they are suited to my purpose. One of you bring down the girl."

Major O'Callaghan chose to think that the request particularly referred to him. He left the room. During his absence Donna Luisa and Bianchi held a whispered consultation, at the end of which Bianchi said something to one of the two men—whom Otway seemed to remember as having been on the *Queen of the Seas*—in consequence of which, as it seemed, the man to whom he had spoken also quitted the apartment.

Immediately afterwards there came into the room someone whom, for a second or two, Otway did not recognise. It was a woman, only partially clothed, the garments she was wearing being ill-assorted odds and ends, like so many unclean rags. Her hair, all unbound, strayed loosely down her shoulders, looking as if it had been untouched by a brush for weeks. Her face was white and drawn, there were hollows about the eyes. She not only looked as if she had been insufficiently fed, but there was something about her which suggested that she was haunted by some unresting fear. As she entered she gazed about her with a dazed expression, as if her eyes were dazzled by the unaccustomed light.

Otway stared at her with incredulous wonder. It was only after prolonged inspection that it dawned on him as being even possible that this pitiable object, this frail wreck of a woman, could be all that was left of Elsie Thornton.

"Elsie!" he cried.

At the sound of his voice she turned and looked at him. As she did so he was relieved of one fear. The obscurity of mental vision which had dimmed her perceptions when he had last encountered her in the house in Sefton Park had passed, at least in part, away, for when she saw him she knew who he was. And not only did she know, but the fashion of her countenance was changed, so that it all at once was lighted up by a transfiguring smile. Her hands fell to her sides, her lips were parted, she stood straighter, her breath was quickened, traces of colour came into her sunken cheeks, she said, half beneath her breath, as if sudden joy had rendered her incapable of speaking loud:

"You!"

When she spoke he began to tremble. He all at once was speechless. He could not even move from where he was, but could only dumbly hold out his arms to her.

But it seemed that that was all she needed and that the gesture was eloquence enough for her. For, as if in answer to his unspoken invitation, she came straight across the room and passed between his outstretched hands. And there, before them all, he folded her about with his arms and pressed her to his breast. Looking up into his face she said, with a sound which was half sob, half laugh:

"I called to you so often and you never came."

Then his voice returned to him.

"I heard you call, but I could not come, because I did not know where you were."

"I tried to tell you."

"And I tried to understand, but only this afternoon did knowledge come to me, at last, then I hastened to you as fast as the train would carry me. Come, let us go. We will talk to these creatures in a more effectual strain when we are out of the den which holds them."

"When!"

The echoed adverb came from the Mother of Caracas. She had been observing the proceedings with an air of complete indifference, as if this man and woman, who, after passing through the valley of the shadow of death, had found each other at last, were marionettes upon a mimic stage. She used the butt of the cigar which she had almost consumed to light a fresh one. Otway took up the challenge which her interjectional interposition seemed to have thrown down.

"Precisely, Donna Luisa, when—and when is now. Come, Elsie, let us go at once."

He began to move with her across the room, no one doing anything to stay them. Donna Luisa spoke to him as he went, apparently more interested in the proper ignition of her new cigar than in the topic on which she touched.

"Nothing, Mr Otway, will give me greater pleasure than to learn that you do propose to go at once and that you intend to take Miss Thornton with you, only—there are certain details which must be gone through first."

By this time Otway, still with his arm encircling Elsie, had reached the door through which he had entered, to find it still closed against his egress. He endeavoured to speak with an assumption of authority which went far beyond what he really felt.

"I insist upon your opening this door for me at once."

"Certainly. The door shall be opened, against your cheque for a hundred thousand pounds." She produced a cheque form from a pocket-book which she produced from some receptacle in the bosom of her dress. "Here is a cheque on a bank which I happen to know will honour your signature for considerably more than a hundred thousand pounds. You have only to fill it up for that small sum, sign it, and give me your word of honour that you will not attempt to stop payment,

and you and Miss Thornton are free as air. Indeed, I shall be very happy to do anything in my power for your comfort."

"Do you think that you can blackmail me or force me to give you a monstrous sum as a ransom from a wholly imaginary danger?"

"If you are not a more foolish person than even I suppose you to be you will give me what I ask, and that without the least demur. You see, Mr Otway, it is actually a question of the old-fashioned formula—your money or your life. In any case I shall have my money, even if you choose to lose your life, because, as you are very well aware, that cousin of yours will be willing to pay lavishly for certain news that you are dead at last—or as good as dead—or, perhaps, even better than dead. So, which is it to be: your money, or your life?"

The answer came from the girl in his arms.

"Don't give her a farthing!"

"I'll not; nor half a one."

The Mother of Caracas still remained outwardly impassive.

"Very good; so it's to be your life. We'll have it—and more than your life—before we've done with you, you may depend on it."

George Otway drew the girl still closer to him and met the woman's gaze with unflinching eyes. He was aware that Bianchi and his friends were smiling, as if in anticipation of pleasures to come. He was also conscious that each man of them held a revolver in his hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AN UPPER ROOM

"MAKE him safe, and keep him safe."

The instruction was addressed to Mr Bianchi by the Mother of Caracas. He turned to the four men at his back, uttering only one word.

"Gentlemen!"

He smiled at them and they at him. All five, smiling together, moved across towards where George Otway stood, with his arm about the girl. When they came to within three or four feet of him Bianchi spoke again.

"If you please!"

And all five halted. Each man held a revolver, keeping a finger on the trigger. Bianchi pointed out the fact to Mr Otway.

"You see?"

George Otway did see. He remembered that midnight incursion into his cabin on board the *Queen of the Seas*. He saw that now, as then, it would need very little to start those revolvers firing. Bianchi explained the situation in his own fashion.

"The question is whether—as the policeman puts it—you will go with us quietly, or whether we shall have to use persuasion."

"Where do you propose to take me?"

"No questions answered."

"Aren't there? You will have to answer one question, or a good deal of persuasion will be required. What do you intend to do with Miss Thornton?"

Bianchi shrugged his shoulders.

"Is that all? A little matter of that sort doesn't count; I will go outside the rule and reply. Miss Thornton goes with you where you go."

"In that case——"

George Otway cut short his sentence at the beginning, looking at the girl with an unspoken inquiry in his eyes.

"Go with them," she said.

Otway considered, reading the purpose which was on the faces in front of him. Then, since he saw no alternative, he assented.

"I am at your service, sir."

Major O'Callaghan associated a coarse laugh with a horrible allusion to Miss Thornton. Stung into imprudence, stepping forward, Otway struck the speaker across the face. Almost simultaneously the major, raising his revolver, fired. Otway became conscious of a sudden sensation, as of burning. His left arm dropped helpless to his side. The major laughed again.

"There's one arm done for. Repeat the same performance with the other and I'll do for that as well."

Elsie came hurrying to him.

"Has he hurt you? Take care! Never mind what he says! They will kill you!"

"Though they kill me no man shall speak as that man spoke and go unpunished."

The voice of Donna Luisa came from the table at the back of the room.

"You are mistaken, George Otway. Be under no delusion. Each man will say and do to you and to the girl exactly what he pleases. If you show resentment it will be you who will be punished, unless you fill up this little cheque for a hundred thousand pounds."

"That I will never do; on that point you have already heard my final decision."

"Then we will get the money from your cousin; probably within the next four-and-twenty hours. Gentlemen!"

"March!"

The command came from Bianchi, with a movement of his revolver towards the door on the opposite side of the apartment.

"Come!" whispered Elsie.

It was her command which he obeyed. They went together to the door at which Bianchi had pointed, the five men close at their heels. Madame O'Callaghan sneered as they passed, smilingly:

"Good-bye, Lottie, darling. Now, at last, you're going to be happy."

But Donna Luisa said, grimly regarding them over the ash of her cigar:

"Otway, you're a fool."

But neither Elsie nor her companion said a word. In silence they passed from the chamber, up what seemed to Otway to be endless stairs, until they came to a door at the top of a narrow flight, which someone opened.

"Enter!" directed Bianchi.

They entered. The moment they were in the door was shut behind them, locked, and barred. The place in which they were was in pitchy blackness.

"Where are we?" asked Otway.

Elsie replied, her voice sounding strangely in the darkness:

"It is the place in which they have kept me a prisoner for I don't know how long now; it is so long that I have lost all count of time."

"Was it at the window of this room that I saw you to-night?"

"That was the room below. They had taken me there to find out—once more—if I would do as they wished. So I ran to the window and called to you. Now I wish I hadn't."

"You must not say that. If you only knew how I have longed to come to you. Is this an attic?"

"I don't think it is even an attic; I fancy it must have been intended as a lumber room, or something of that kind. It hasn't a window."

"No window? But I seem to feel fresh air."

"That comes from a trap-door in the roof, they have left it open. Sometimes the rain comes pouring through."

"The dear creatures! But, if the rain gets in, it is just possible that someone might get out of it."

"No one could; it is so small it is only a few inches square. And then it is so far above the floor. The ceiling slopes; where the trap-door is it must be twelve feet high. Give me your hand, I will show you where it is." She took his hand, leading him through the darkness. "Take care! we are near the wall!"

"How can you see?"

"I can't; but I know. I have been here so long that I know. Put out your hand, you will feel the wall. The trap-door is right above us. Look up, if the night is fine you will see the sky. It is fine, I can see a star. Can you not see it too?"

"I can see it very well."

"It shines down on us, glowing brightly, like a beacon

of hope. Don't you think it may have been sent to us to-night, of all nights, to bid us hope?"

"Beyond a doubt it has."

"How often have I just stood here, watching for the stars. When I have seen one I have felt that God has not forgotten me. When I have not—which has been very often, for, you see, the trap is so small—I have been afraid He has. It has been so lonely up here at night in the darkness—so lonely."

"Do they never give you a light?"

"Never. When the daylight goes I see nothing until the morning comes. And, as I sleep so badly, you cannot think how long the nights seem, especially when it is cold or wet."

"Is the place decently furnished?"

"There is no furniture at all."

"No furniture? Then—do they keep you here in the daytime?"

"They keep me here always."

"Always! But there must be some furniture? Is there nothing which serves as chair or table or bed?"

"There is nothing; nothing at all. The place is quite empty."

"But how do you manage about sleeping?"

"As I can. I lie on the floor. Sometimes—when it is raining—it is wet. It is never very clean, and it is always hard. I do not get much sleep."

"Do they treat you better as regards food?"

"Sometimes a whole day passes without their bringing me any food at all; once there were two days. Then I thought they were going to starve me to death. The food is never very nice when they bring it. They never give me plates or dishes. They just tumble it on the floor, so I have to pick it with my fingers and eat it as if I were a dog. I get so hungry that I could eat anything anyhow. I never knew what hunger meant till they shut me up in here."

"But what have you done to them that they should behave to you as if they were devils?"

There was an interval of silence before she answered. She was so close to him that he could feel her trembling.

"They want me to do something which I won't do; they are so wicked themselves that they think it doesn't matter what a girl does; and, because I won't, they think they can

make me by treating me like this. But they never will; never! never! never!"

She spoke with a note in her voice which caused him—almost unconsciously—to draw her closer to him. As he did so he leaned against the wall at his back, feeling all at once as if his legs were giving way beneath him. She was quick to detect that something was wrong.

"What is the matter? You are trembling! the wound is worse than you said."

His voice had suddenly become faint and tremulous.

"I don't think it's the wound. The truth is, I've not been very well just lately, and—the excitement has been a little beyond me."

Something—as he put it—had been a little beyond him. Even as he spoke she felt a quiver go all over him. She tried to hold him up, but, before she guessed what was about to happen, he had slipped through her arms on to the floor. She felt him lying, an inert mass, at her feet.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DOLLIE AND HER HUSBAND

THE library at High Dene: high noon. Mr Frank Andrews in a restless mood, flitting from chair to chair, standing, walking here and there. In his hand a letter, with which he continually fidgets. Reclining at full length on a couch his wife—Mrs Frank Andrews—the Dollie Lee of long ago. Nothing could be in more complete contrast than her demeanour and her husband's. He in perpetual motion, as if some internal machinery prevented his remaining still, even for a second; she in immovable repose, observing his incapacity to remain quiescent with a little smile of amusement. If anything, she has grown prettier, and if certain rounded contours suggest undignified plumpness in the not distant future, they are not yet sufficiently accentuated to lessen her charms. There is about her an air of daintiness which, in some odd way, recalls an exquisite child. It would have needed a shrewd judge of human nature to detect in this delightfully delicate little lady even a suspicion of guile.

"It begins to look as if you were not mistaken after all."

The remark came from Mr Andrews, in a tone which more than hinted that the gentleman was not in the very best of tempers. The lady, on the other hand, replied in mellifluous accents which were the very essence of sweetness; but, as is the case with so many sweet things, there was a drop of bitterness even in their saccharine quality.

"In matters of importance I endeavour to be accurate. In a matter of such first-rate importance I think you might have taken my accuracy for granted. It would have been at least more courteous."

"Courtesy be hanged?"

"If you please. Still, it seems a pity. What has courtesy done to you that you should wish to hang it?"

"Don't talk that fiddle-faddle stuff to me now. It's

because you seem incapable of taking anything seriously that I laughed when you said you believed you had seen the fellow alive at Rouen."

"I did not say I believed: I said I had seen him."

"But you said it in a way which made it impossible to tell if you were, or were not, joking. You don't seem to realise what it means to us if George Otway is alive."

"Don't I? You are again mistaken."

"You wouldn't wear that don't-care-a-dam air if you did."

"Shouldn't I?"

Her lips were parted in a pretty smile which Mr Andrews did not notice, and the meaning of which would have eluded him if he had.

"If George Otway didn't commit suicide, if that wasn't his body which was found in the Thames, if he is alive at the present moment, then you and I are beggars—and worse. He can call us to account for every penny of his we have spent, and since I certainly shall be unable to refund a single one of them I shall be a ruined man for ever and a day."

"I realise that very clearly, I assure you."

"Then do you speak so gaily because you suppose my ruin won't affect you?"

"My dear Frank, can you conceive it as being even possible that I should not wish to share your fall whatever it might be?"

"Bah! talk sense! do you think I don't know you through and through? If you could gain sixpence by drowning me to-morrow you'd do it, and never turn a hair."

"I shouldn't do it for sixpence, really, Frank. You exaggerate; and I assure you you don't know me, although you think you do. Shall I ever forget what were my feelings when, in that Rouen circus, among those crazy people, with death staring us in the face, I first heard his voice. I recognised, on the instant, that he had played on us some extraordinary, some incredible trick. He had detected me first. When I appealed to him for help, he regarded me with a smile in his eyes for which I could have torn his heart out. If I had not been so conscious that he was the only creature present who was capable of doing anything to save me I would willingly have helped him burn. As it was, I did my little best."

Mr Andrews paced in silence up and down the spacious apartment, biting at his thumbs as he went.

"I had not credited him with so much malice."

His wife laughed, lightly, merrily, as if she had not a care in the world.

"You darling Frank! To be sure, he has treated both of us very badly—and yet, it is not so certain. We have had a pretty decent time upon the whole—at least, I know I have—and that fact cannot be altered even if I have to suffer for it afterwards. It is not yet plain that we shall have to suffer—either you or I."

"When he is tired of masquerading, of playing the game of cat and mouse, he has only to walk in at the front door and there is an end of us for ever."

"Precisely; but perhaps it mayn't be so easy for him to walk in at the front door as you seem to suppose."

"Do you mean because, in some way, which I don't understand, you or somebody else, has mixed him up with that murdering scoundrel, Jacob Gunston? Even granting that the misapprehension has gone so far as you seem to suppose, he has only to prove himself to be George Otway to prick the bubble on the instant."

"Again I am not so certain. The matter has gone beyond a jest. He has been doing some very queer things, has our dear friend, and has got himself into such a tangle that only by process of law can it be unravelled. And if the law does get hold of him he'll have a very, very hard time. What a joke it would be if he came to be hanged."

"No fear of that, it's much more likely that hanging's the fate in store for us!"

"I'm not so sure that I'd mind that if I were hanged for him."

There was something in the tone in which she said it which caused her husband to cease for a moment from his restless peregrinations and to turn and stare at her with startled eyes.

"Dollie! take care! walls have ears! And even if they haven't, there are things which—though spoken in jest—are left better unsaid."

"I'm not afraid of the ears, and when you and I have to deal with a situation such as confronts us now there are things which must be said. What do you suppose is the meaning of the letter which you have in your hand?"

"That we shall soon learn. Donna Luisa D'Agostino will

tell us. The carriage has gone to the station to meet her. At any moment she may be here."

"Just so, and find us unprepared."

"Unprepared! How do you mean—find us unprepared?"

"My dearest Frank, this is a matter in which it is essential that you and I should see clearly, eye to eye. Don't play the innocent with me, and try to play the man. You can sometimes, you know."

"I don't know why you talk like that, unless you wish to exasperate me."

"Not at all. On the contrary, I particularly wish not to exasperate you. I want you to look facts in the face, that's all."

"I've half a mind to jerk the whole thing up, hunt up Otway on my own account, and trust to his good-nature to let me down lightly. If I'm not careful you'll lead me into some infernal mischief."

"When you talk like that I begin to suspect you of a desire to exasperate me. Frank!"

"What do you want?"

"Come here!"

She held up her finger, with a siren gesture, beckoning to him with smiling lips and eyes. He hesitated, then crossed to where she lay, stretched out at full length upon the couch.

"Well, what is it?"

"Kiss me!"

"I don't want to kiss you."

"Oh yes, you do, you always want to kiss me, and I want to be kissed. Kneel down, so that I can put my arms about your neck and hold you tight." Without remonstrance he obeyed. Drawing his face to hers, she pressed her lips to his, as if she sought to inoculate him with her spirit by means of a kiss. "Frank, you know you love me."

"Sometimes I wish I didn't."

His voice seemed hoarse. She laughed, as if to herself, her lips still close to his.

"You can't help loving me whatever you may wish. I hold you with bonds which are stronger than steel. To kiss me you'd sell your soul."

"I've already sold it."

"I know you have, you—goose! We've both of us done that—if we ever had any souls to sell. So, since we have

nothing else to take to market, let us make as much as we possibly can out of what we've already disposed of. Now, Frank, listen. At the present moment you and I are two of the greatest persons in England. You don't want to become all at once nothing and nobody, a butt and a gibe, and to drag me with you."

"I emphatically don't."

"Then let Donna Luisa D'Agostino find us prepared."

"I tell you again I don't know what you mean by prepared."

"Evidently, from her letter, she has got George Otway, somehow, in her hands, and is willing, for a price, to murder him."

"Dollie!"

"She would murder him, not us. We should be as innocent as babes."

"Let me go, I knew you'd try to get me into some confounded hole."

"I won't let you go; and as for a confounded hole, you couldn't be in a more confounded hole than you're in already. It's only likely to be a question of price — so I judge from her letter. And it seems to me that, in our position, price ought to be no object. To have George Otway really dead is a consummation for which we should be willing to pay anything."

"But if I were willing to listen to anything so horrible for a single second, which I'm not, you don't seem to understand that this fiend of a woman would have us in our power."

"We should also have her in ours. Are you afraid she would blackmail us?"

"Afraid! It's not a question of fear, it's a certainty; she'd bleed us for all we are worth."

"My dear Frank, in any case it would be worth our while to pay her a fat annuity, but I'm not so sure that we need do it. George Otway once dead—and this time I give you my word that I will see, personally, that there is no deception —I don't see of what we need be alarmed."

"Not with that woman holding over us her sword of Damocles?"

"What sword of Damocles? She will be the criminal, not us."

"She will have acted as our agent."

"Well, what then?"

"If at any time we should refuse to comply with her demands, and you may be sure they will be monstrous ones, she has only to open her mouth and we shall be within measurable distance of the gallows. My God! the very thought of it makes me shiver."

"Something makes you shiver, Frank dear, but I don't quite understand what. In the first place, she'll have to prove agency, which, as I shall manage matters, she won't find easy; and, in the second, if anyone goes to the gallows, she will. I expect, when it came to the sticking-point, the thought of it would make her shiver quite as much as it does you." She softly smoothed his hair and smiled at him. "Darling, you leave the whole management of the business to me. Only give me carte-blanche as to money, it shall be done as cheaply as possible, I'm no fonder of giving something for nothing than you are. I undertake to so arrange things that if it comes to a question of who has the whip-hand, this woman shall be in our power and not we in hers."

"Do you mean that you wish to see her alone and without my appearing on the scene at all?"

He was looking down at the hand with which she had just been fondling him, or he could hardly have failed to have been struck by the very peculiar smile with which she answered him.

"I don't go quite so far as that, Frank dear. I think it ought to be obvious that you and I are acting together; I only want you to leave the actual diplomacy to me, that's all."

Soon afterwards a servant entered to announce that the carriage had returned from the station, and that Donna Luisa D'Agostino and Mr Bianchi were in the drawing-room. When the servant had gone, the husband and wife looked at each other, the husband being the first to speak.

"Who's Mr Bianchi? She said nothing about anyone coming but herself. I should have thought the fewer witnesses the better."

His wife, who had risen from the couch, shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"What does it matter who he is? I suppose persons of that sort occasionally run in double harness." She laid her two hands upon her husband's shoulders. "Now, Frank, you understand, you're to leave as much of the talking as you conveniently can to me."

"I'll leave it all, if you wish. I repeat that I'm perfectly willing not to put in an appearance on the scene."

"Thank you; but since this is a game which you and I must play together I don't think that that would be quite the thing."

Again her dainty features were lightened by that enigmatic smile.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PRICE OF BLOOD

WHEN Mr and Mrs Frank Andrews followed each other into the great drawing-room they found, in an arm-chair, a huge woman, clothed in a singularly lurid costume of crimson satin. Mrs Andrews, whose taste was proverbial, was so startled by the spectacle her visitor presented that, forgetting her good manners, she stared at her a moment in speechless silence. Behind the lady's chair, standing like a soldier at attention, was a spare, dark-skinned man with bead-like eyes. Mrs Andrews opened the ball with a formal inquiry.

"Donna Luisa D'Agostino?"

The woman in the arm-chair inclined her head.

"That is my name." She motioned to the man at the back of her chair. "And this is my husband, Bianchi."

"Your husband? I see." Mrs Andrews regarded Mr Bianchi as if she did not quite know what to make of him or of his wife either. "We have had a letter from you." Donna Luisa merely nodded. "In that letter you intimated a desire to favour us with a visit." The visitor nodded again. "We should be glad—since you are a perfect stranger to us—if you will explain what your letter means."

Donna Luisa's reply, if it could be called a reply, not impossibly took Mrs Andrews aback.

"You speak for your husband, as I speak for mine?"

Mrs Andrews endeavoured to conceal any discomfiture she may have felt with a laugh. She turned to the gentleman in question.

"I don't know that I speak for him in any peculiar sense, do I?"

"Excepting that I am prepared to endorse whatever you may say." Mr Andrews addressed his visitor, a little sententiously: "My wife and I are one."

Donna Luisa's answer was a trifle grim.

"My husband and I are also one. We speak with a common mouth—mine. I only say this in order that we may understand each other. As to what I wrote you, the meaning is very simple. You possess this house, this property, this great fortune, you and your husband, because it is supposed George Otway is dead. He is not dead. He lives. There is the affair in a nutshell."

Mrs Andrews's manner, when she spoke, was sweetness itself.

"But, pardon me, Mr Otway is legally dead and buried. As I have already observed, you are a stranger to us. What proof have we that what you say is true?"

"The proof is easy, since he is at present a prisoner in my house."

"A prisoner in your house? Dear me! And on what grounds do you detain him?"

"I detain him because I want to make some money out of him, that is why."

Mrs Andrews indulged in musical laughter, as at the best joke in the world.

"That is a very original idea. And how do you propose to make it?"

"You give me money to keep him dead."

"What quaint notions you have! And what a weird way of expressing them! What do you mean by keeping him dead?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On your own wishes."

"I see. But suppose that we wouldn't mind if he were actually dead?"

"If you will give me enough I will undertake that he shall be murdered."

Mrs Andrews raised her pretty shoulders and shivered.

"You mustn't talk like that, you really mustn't. I couldn't bear to think of anything horrid happening to that dreadful man, badly though he's used us."

"It is only a word. I come from a country where they think no more of killing a man than of killing a rat. It is an affair of habit. We have it, you haven't—that is the difference."

"I only hinted that we shouldn't mind if he were actually dead. We couldn't dream of having anything to do with compassing his death. That would be too too dreadful."

"I understand. You wish us to do all the dirty work ourselves."

"I did not say so. I did not know that there was any what you call 'dirty work' to be done. Please take it clearly from me that neither Mr Andrews nor I can allow ourselves to be associated with anything which is in the least degree questionable."

Donna Luisa did what she probably seldom did do—she smiled, the smile revealing a set of large, square, discoloured teeth.

"You are a clever woman; but in this case it is not necessary to be so clever. With me it is simply an affair of business. You keep your share of the bargain and I will keep mine."

Mrs Andrews opened her eyes with an expression which was almost infantile in its innocence.

"Bargain? What bargain?"

"What will you give me to keep him dead?"

"I tell you again I don't understand what you mean by keep him dead."

"In my country, when they want a person to give no further trouble, yet do not wish to do away with him outright, they place him in a position in which he loses his sight, his power of speech, his senses altogether. It is not their fault he gets in that state. It happens so. Then they say that he is better than dead."

"What a terrible idea! How the poor creatures must suffer."

"They suffer the tortures of the damned. They themselves would sooner die a hundred times. I have seen it often, so I know."

A look came on the speaker's face which was not pleasant to contemplate. Mrs Andrews regarded her as if she had for her a curious fascination.

"And what becomes of them afterwards?"

"What does it matter? They are changed beyond all recognition. They do not know who they are themselves; no one knows who they are; it is of no consequence."

"Then they don't die?"

"Not of necessity—not, sometimes, for years and years. They live often to be very old. Not long ago I saw in a street in London an old man carrying what you call a sand-

wich board. It seems he was not quite blind; he felt his way with a stick. Although he did not know it—no one knows it—he is the rightful owner of one of the greatest estates in South America. I spoke to him: he did not know me; it was very funny."

Mr Andrews said something which, at first sight, seemed hardly germane to the subject under discussion.

"If you don't mind, my dear, I think I'll open a window."

His wife checked him as he was moving to effect his purpose.

"I don't think I would, Frank, if I were you. It's not very hot."

"I feel it stifling."

Mrs Andrews raised her delicately-arched eyebrows.

"Surely it's not quite so bad as that; I'm quite cool. I'm afraid I should feel a draught. Come, Frank, sit by me, and keep still."

Mr Andrews shook his head. Instead of going to her he leaned against a table, thrust his hands into his pockets, and frowned. The conversation did not seem to be giving him pleasure. Wholly unmoved by her husband's mutinous behaviour Mrs Andrews fixed her pretty, pleading eyes on Donna Luisa's face, as if she saw something in her saturnine countenance which, though it would have filled others with feelings of repulsion, afforded her no little satisfaction. She continued, in the same soft, soothing tones in which she had spoken throughout:

"How interesting it is to hear you talk, it gives me a new sensation, you are so full of the unusual." She began to pick with the tips of her fingers at the embroidery on her frock, pursing up her lips as she did so, as if she were turning something over in her mind. "I'm afraid it would scarcely do to—as you put it—keep him dead; that is hardly what one would like. You see, one never knows."

"One never knows what?"

"If a person, as you phrase it, is better than dead, one never knows all sorts of things. If he is really dead, one knows everything."

"You would prefer that he should be dead?"

"Infinitely, oh dear me, yes; that would be so much more satisfactory," she uttered a little sigh—"if Providence approved."

"It is only a question of money. He shall be dead in four-and-twenty hours if you give enough. In Europe there is so often trouble when a person is killed. In my own country it is not so. Even if they prove you did it you are not yet at an end—not by any means." Again her visage was distorted by the grin which revealed her uncomfortable-looking teeth. "Here it is different. If you kill a little baby that is not yet really alive, what a fuss there is made. You go about for ever after as if you had a rope about your neck. That is why I should prefer to arrange that he should be better than dead."

"We shouldn't like that at all; it wouldn't suit us a bit. George Otway is supposed to be dead, and we should like him to be dead—really and truly—as he's supposed to be."

"Very good. It is enough. By this time to-morrow he shall be dead—really and truly—if you will only give enough."

Mrs Andrews was still picking with the tiny tips of her slender fingers at the embroidery on her frock.

"What's the figure?"

"Two hundred thousand pounds."

"That's a deal of money."

"There's a deal to be done for it!"

"That sum would be a complete and final quittance of all claims."

"Of all claims, a complete and final quittance. The money once paid you would never see or hear of me again, and I should never see you. That would be better for both parties."

"So I should imagine." Mrs Andrews looked up at her husband gaily, saucily. "Well, what do you say, my dearest lord?"

As he answered, Mr Andrews paced to and fro; his restless fit had apparently returned.

"What do we get for it?"

"I will see we get all that we want. The point is, it's a frightful lot of money."

"When must it be paid?"

It was Donna Luisa who answered.

"Now."

Mr Andrews ceased to walk up and down, and stared. His wife observed her visitor with laughing surprise.

"Now? Do you mean that two hundred thousand pounds is to be given you this instant minute?"

"He will continue to live until it is given to me—that is what I mean."

Mrs Andrews laughed aloud.

"What an extremely business-like person you seem to be, almost too business-like, I fear, for us. Supposing you had the money, what guarantee should we have that you would carry out the letter of your bond?"

"You could come and see him killed."

"Come and see him killed?" Mrs Andrews puckered up her charming features into a queer grimace. "That would be amusing; I should like to see him killed. Still, I'm not sure it would be altogether the wisest thing to do. I fancy that the best arrangement we could come to would be one on these lines. The price is a large one, but I think, Frank, dear, that I speak for you when I say that we would be willing to pay even that price for a certain event. Am I not correct, Frank, in saying so?"

Her husband turned his face away from her before he answered.

"I'm willing to do exactly as you wish."

Her countenance was illumined by a happy smile.

"You always spoil me, Frank; you are so good." She addressed herself to Donna Luisa: "You perceive that we are not likely to haggle about terms, only—we don't want to have any risk of giving something for nothing. You say George Otway will be dead by this time to-morrow. Where can his dead body be seen?"

"In my house in Paris."

"Good; then I will see it there."

"What do you mean?—you will see it there?"

"I will run over to Paris by to-morrow morning's boat for the especial purpose of seeing George Otway dead. In the interim, Mr Andrews and I will give you our joint undertaking to hand you two hundred thousand pounds on your proving, to my satisfaction, that George Otway is dead. Show me him dead, and you shall have the money there and then. Will that content you?"

Donna Luisa looked at the man standing erect, rigid, behind her chair. They exchanged glances. For the first time Mr Bianchi spoke:

"Am I to understand, madam, that you and your husband will give us a written promise to pay us the amount so soon

as you receive ocular proof that George Otway is dead, and that you, yourself, will be in Paris to-morrow to receive that proof?"

"You have stated what I would wish to be the basis of our understanding very clearly, sir."

Bianchi spoke to his wife.

"I think that such an undertaking as madam refers to may be considered equivalent to a cash payment."

Donna Luisa acquiesced.

"I think so also."

Later, Donna Luisa D'Agostino and Mr Bianchi were being driven to the railway station in one of the High Dene broughams. They were examining, with keen interest, a sheet of crested notepaper on which something was written. Bianchi tapped it with his finger.

"George Otway's death warrant," he muttered, half beneath his breath. He smiled. Donna Luisa took the sheet of paper from him, with a characteristic comment.

"I knew that man would bring me good fortune so soon as I saw him in my cabin on board the *Queen of the Seas*. I saw money shining at me out of his eyes."

Bianchi ventured on what was perhaps intended for a little jest.

"You perceive, my dear, that you will do almost as well out of him as if you had made him your husband."

The jest—if it was one—fell flat, the lady repudiating the suggestion with scorn.

"That is nonsense. If I had married him it would not have been necessary to kill him to obtain from him two hundred thousand pounds. If I had made him my husband he would have given me a million willingly to have afforded him an opportunity to divorce me, I know. When you deprived me of an opportunity of making him my husband you did me an injury not to be forgotten; for what, after all, are two hundred thousand pounds, especially when it must be shared with others?"

Bianchi knitted his brows.

"This time there will be but little sharing. I think that this is a matter which you and I can manage by ourselves."

"I think so also."

Husband and wife looked at each other long and steadily, murder in their eyes. The woman slipped George Otway's

death warrant into her unbuttoned bodice, so that it lay close to her breast.

In the drawing-room at High Dene Mr and Mrs Andrews remained for a few minutes together, *tête-à-tête*, after their visitors had gone. The gentleman exclaimed, almost as soon as the door was closed, regarding the lady with an expression in which incredulity was mingled with something else:

"You don't seriously mean that you will go to Paris to-morrow to see the fellow lying dead?"

The lady was trifling with some of the numerous rings which almost covered her slender fingers.

"Why not? I assure you—since he overheard us at the stile—it has been my constant dream to see him lying dead. When they showed me the battered body they had taken out of the river I was glad, for I knew, by the look of what was left, that he had had a pretty bad time before he died. But from the moment when, in that Rouen circus, I learnt that he had tricked us, and that all the while he lived, I have had one great desire—that I might kill him, giant as he is, with my own hands, and see him, at my feet, dead, so that I might spurn him with the toe of my shoe. And now my desire's to be all but realised. I sha'n't sleep all night for thinking that to-morrow I'm to see him really dead. I hope they'll kill him in some horrid way, so that to-morrow, when I see his carcase, it may be a carcase and nothing more."

Mr Frank Andrews drew himself away from her. When he spoke in his voice there was a tremor.

"Dolly, you only talk like that—you don't mean it?"

"Don't I? You know better. I do mean it, and you know I mean it. In me there is what I believe to be an inextinguishable thirst for blood. It has never yet been gratified; but, if I only had the chance, all those who've ever slighted me I'd like to kill: what a feast of killing I'd have. I'd like to smear my milk-white body with the blood of all those whom I hate—and they are many. What an orgie it would be! Then, like a snake which has had a plethoric meal, I'd rest a while. How lovely it would be to rest and dream—and dream—after one has had one's fill of killing!"

This time Mr Andrews's discomposure was almost uncomfortably obvious. He drew farther and farther from his daintily-fashioned little wife, observing her with fearful eyes.

It seemed to him that—at least for the moment—she had all at once become insane.

And in Paris there was a sparrow which had been caught in a trap. In catching it the trap had broken its wing. Attached to its broken wing was a scrap of paper which told how Elsie Thornton and George Otway, held prisoners in a certain house in the Rue du Bois, were in urgent need of help.

Already the prisoners in that garret at the top of the house had given up hope. It appeared to them that God had forgotten them. They had been three days without food. Starvation stared them in the face. The little strength that was in him had gone out of Otway, so that he could scarcely stand. It seemed to Elsie that he was dying before her eyes.

And speeding back to Paris was Donna Luisa D'Agostino, with George Otway's death warrant snuggled cosily against her breast, while she planned with her husband how they could keep to themselves the price of his blood.

At High Dene Mrs Andrews—once the Dollie Lee of his fondest adoration — dreamed, still wide awake, of seeing him dead.

And no man came to that sparrow which was caught in the trap.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SALLIE PRICE HAS VISITORS

WHEN George Otway left for Paris to pry into the meaning of the vision of the house with the red blind, Sallie Price, so soon as she was left alone, going to the head of the staircase, listened as he descended. Satisfied that he had reached the foot, rushing back to her own apartment, flinging back the one window as wide as it would go, she thrust her body half through it in an effort to catch a last glimpse of him as, far below, he passed along the pavement. When, after he had vanished wholly from sight, she returned into the room and closed the window, her face seemed uncomfortably white.

"Thank goodness he's got safely away."

But, somehow, she did not look thankful; and, if her dominant feeling really was one of thankfulness, she had an odd way of showing it. Breaking into a passion of tears she threw herself on to the bed which he had so recently quitted and cried as if her heart was breaking. The mood, however, was but short-lived. Presently she sat up, and, wiping the tears from her still streaming eyes, addressed herself in tones of anger.

"What a selfish wretch I am, crying because he's safe! If he'd stayed, and they'd got him, then——!" The sentence remained unfinished. Her glance fell on the still open cash-box. "He's only taken thirty francs. What's thirty francs to a man in his position?—especially as he's fitter for a hospital than anything else." She examined the remaining contents of the box. "A hundred francs, that's all! I don't know who's most in want of them, he or me. The worst of it is I'm so behind with the rent. There won't be much change left when I've paid up all that's owing, and then," with a sigh, "what I shall do goodness only knows." Suddenly the expression of her countenance changed: she seemed to be straining every faculty in the act of listening. "Who's that?

I shouldn't wonder if it's them police! I do believe they're coming!" She had just closed the cash-box, and locked it in her trunk, when there came a knocking at the door. "Who's there?"

The door was opened. A voice inquired in English:

"May I come in?"

"Seems to me that you're in already. Who are you? and what may you please to want?"

"Am I speaking to Miss Price?"

"You are; but you needn't if you don't choose, nobody asked you to."

"I understand that you have an invalid in your charge."

"Do you? Then you understand all wrong, because I've nothing and no one in my charge except myself, and that's charge enough for me."

Instead of showing the slightest sign of being offended at the abrupt fashion of Miss Price's speech the visitor laughed. There was something in the quality of his laughter which caused the lady to observe him with closer attention than she had hitherto condescended to show.

"He doesn't look as if he was a policeman," she told herself, "nor yet as if he was one of Sam Tebb's friends either; and yet, if he isn't, who is he, and what does he mean by coming asking questions? One thing's sure, he's good-looking enough for anything."

Exactly what Miss Price meant by her latter remark was not altogether plain, but there certainly was not much fault to find with the stranger on the source of his looks. He was tall, well-built, young: all three good things in themselves, and his face was not by any means the worst part of him. As he laughed at her she felt that she had seldom seen anyone whose exterior was better adapted to inspire confidence at sight; and Sallie Price was a young lady of experience, better acquainted than she would have cared to own with the shady side of human nature. It was this fact which possibly explained the acridity with which she still chose to regard the stranger.

"What may you be laughing at? Think I'm funny? Because, if so, you're wrong, and you'd much better take yourself off to where you'll find someone who really will amuse you."

It seemed the visitor feared that the lady addressed him in that somewhat unusual strain because he had offended her.

"I beg your pardon for laughing; but I have come as a friend to see a friend, and your apparent assumption that my presence here must necessarily have an unfriendly meaning struck me as curious."

"Oh, it struck you as curious, did it?—and you've come as a friend to see a friend, have you?—and what friend might you have come to see?"

Again the stranger smiled; and Miss Price could not blind herself to the fact that there was something very pleasant in his smile.

"He has been recently known in Rouen as Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist. Having learned how you have acted towards him the part of good Samaritan, and have even coaxed him back from death to life, I had hoped to find him here."

"Then he's not here, and that's all about it; and as for me playing the part of good Samaritan, you go and try that sort of talk on someone who likes it; I don't."

"I'm sorry to learn that my friend is not here; and I am also sorry, Miss Price, that you should show such a disposition to misconstrue everything I may say."

She noted—in spite of the lingering remnants of the smile—the look of genuine disappointment which had come upon his face.

"What's your name?"

"Frank Thornton."

"Frank Thornton! Then you're one of her lot?"

"Her lot? What do you mean?"

She bit her lip; the words had escaped her unawares. She eyed him, for a second or two, in silence.

"Are you any relation to Elsie Thornton?"

"Elsie! She's my sister! What do you know of Elsie Thornton?"

"What do I know?"

Miss Price laughed queerly. She thought of the hours she had sat by George Otway's bedside with Elsie Thornton's name continually on his delirious lips. The stranger pressed her with a volley of questions.

"Where is she? Have you seen her? What has she been doing all this time? Is she well? How is it that my mother has heard nothing from her for so long?"

"I know nothing of your sister except that I have heard

her spoken of. Tell me, what is the name of the man you have come to see?"

"George Otway."

"And you are indeed his friend?"

"When I owe to him all that makes life worth living! What a question to ask! Why, not long ago I was a felon, sentenced to a term of imprisonment for a crime of which I was innocent. I knew that if I could only regain my freedom for a few hours I could establish my innocence beyond all doubt or question. I made a mad attempt at escape. When I was within an ace of being recaptured I met George Otway, who was then to me an utter stranger. I told him my story. He then and there insisted on rendering me that help of which I stood in such pressing need. He donned my felon's garb——"

"Your felon's garb?"

"My felon's garb. He clad me in his own clothes, and, bidding me God speed, started me again on what, without his aid, would have been a hopeless venture. With his help I did all that I had set out to do, and more: induced the guilty to confess, made plain my innocence, and, obtaining the King's pardon for what I had never done, went back into the world without a stain upon my character. If it had not been for George Otway I might have been still a branded felon, and you ask me if I am indeed his friend."

"And what became of him after he had put on your prison clothes?"

"They captured him, mistaking him for me. In his turn he escaped, came to France, became a performer in a circus. It was only yesterday that I learnt that he had told my mother the whole story in a letter which he had written in Rouen. I rushed here post-haste, only, it seems, to find that he is here no longer."

"He has gone to her."

"To her?—to whom?"

"To whom? Stupid! I beg your pardon, but some people's denseness is enough to provoke a saint. He has gone to her for whose sake he did so much for you, to your sister, Elsie Thornton."

"But where is she?'

"She's in Paris."

"In Paris?"

"Yes; at least, he said she was in Paris. I can't think of the name of the street. According to him it all came to him in a kind of a sort of a vision—where she was, and all about it—and nothing would suit him but that he should start off there and then. He did tell me the name of the street, but I can't think what it was."

"Try and think."

"I am trying, aren't I?—what do you suppose I'm doing?—but I was in such a state of flurry when he told me that it went in at one ear and out of the other. I know it was Rue du something, and that's all I do know. Hush! there's someone else coming up the stairs; I do believe it is them dratted police this time."

"Police!"

"Yes, police! There's plenty of idiots in this world, and to spare, and some of them have got it into their idiotic heads that he's a murderer—he, who wouldn't hurt a fly! Jacob Gunston they think he is, and they've been hounding him all over the place as if he was the biggest scamp that ever went unhung. It was only because I knew that they were after him again that I let him go to Paris, though he really wasn't hardly any more fit to go than if he was a baby. Keep still! Mind your face! Here they are! If it's them don't you let out that you know any more about him than if he was the man in the moon."

There came a sharp tapping at the door. Without waiting for an answer the handle was turned, and someone entered—an individual clothed with the air of authority which goes with the not particularly becoming costume of the French sergent-de-ville. At his heels were two subordinates. Behind him was a person whom, although he was in ordinary civilian attire, the keen-witted Sallie Price immediately guessed to be an English detective. He was big-bearded and burly, and would have made two of the Frenchman who was, for once in a way, his colleague, who happened to be short, and generally undersized, with a hatchet-shaped face and pinched features, and a long, thin, waxed moustache, which stood out, like two pieces of wire, on either side of his bad-tempered-looking mouth.

The instant he was in the room he addressed himself to Frank Thornton with a take-it-for-granted air, which, under the circumstances, was a little surprising.

"Your name is Jacob Gunston. I arrest you. You are my prisoner. Secure him!"

His subordinates showed a willingness to obey their superior officer's command which some people might have found embarrassing. But his "prisoner" only smiled.

"Pardon me, I am not Jacob Gunston. My name is Thornton—Frank Thornton."

The sergent-de-ville displayed contemptuous incredulity.

"Your name is not Jacob Gunston? Of course not! It is all a mistake? I know; it is always a mistake. It is extraordinary how full the prisons are of mistakes. All the same, you are my prisoner. I arrest you on a charge of murder."

Frank Thornton still laughed.

"But I assure you that this time you are making a mistake. I only arrived in France this morning, and my name is Thornton."

"You only arrived in France this morning?—that is a pretty tale which you expect me to believe. This is the fellow, is it not?"

He beckoned to the Englishman, who had remained upon the doorstep. The burly man looked Frank Thornton up and down. Stroking his beard, he addressed him in English:

"What do you say your name is?"

"Frank Thornton; my father is the vicar of Dullington, in Sussex."

"You are the person who jumped out of the Lewes train in Balcombe Tunnel?"

"I am that well-known blunder of the police. You, apparently, are one of the men who blundered. Do you propose to place another blunder to your credit by arresting me for a man whom I have never seen?"

"You have never seen Jacob Gunston—you?"

"Yes—I. I tell you again that I have never seen Jacob Gunston in my life."

"You expect me to believe that, when I know, as well as you know, that it was Jacob Gunston who helped you to escape from your father's house."

"You are under a complete misapprehension; that was not Jacob Gunston. Possibly you don't know it—being a policeman you would be ignorant of simple facts—but Jacob Gunston happens to be dead."

"Dead!" The bearded man uttered a sound which was,

perhaps, meant to be a derisive laugh. "I like that. He wasn't dead half-an-hour ago, and I do know so much. Here, you, Tebb!" he called to someone who had seemingly preferred to remain modestly in the background, somewhere down the stairs. Heavy footsteps were heard ascending. Soon there appeared—Sam Tebb. He had not escaped the consequences of being nearly roasted alive any more than had been the case with George Otway. Bodily he seemed to have decreased to half his original size, a fact which was accentuated by a stoop which almost bent him double. Indeed, it seemed that it was only with the aid of a stick that he could walk at all. No one would have taken him then to be the famous "pillar" of the Dandison Brothers: he would have been a rash individual who would have proposed to balance nine stalwart men on those poor, tremulous shoulders. The detective addressed him with an air of authority which could hardly have been agreeable to Sam's notoriously sensitive feelings. "Come here, you, Tebb, step as lively as you can." Mr Tebb dragged himself into the room in a fashion which was hardly suggestive of liveliness. The burly gentleman directed his attention to Frank Thornton: "Is this our man, or isn't it?"

Mr Tebb's features, as he stared at the young man out of his bleared eyes, were expressive of supreme disgust.

"That? No! He ain't no more our man than I am—ain't nothing like him. Our man's hid under the bed or somewhere. Trust that young baggage of a girl to stow him out of sight if it's to be done, and to trick you if she can. I know her." Sam's glance wandered round the room. Apparently his malevolence had increased with the decay of his physical powers. When he saw Sallie Price he snarled at her, like some toothless, but still vicious, cur. "So, it's you, is it? Curse you for a treacherous cat! Been harbouring him, have you?—been harbouring a bloody-minded murderer? You won't save him. They'll hang him for all your harbouring—hang him till he's dead. And if right was right, they'd hang you with him—you devil's daughter!"

In return Miss Price regarded him with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes and lips just a little curled.

"You've not improved, either in manners or appearance, Mr Sam Tebb; and I can't congratulate you on the new trade you seem to have taken up. But when there's no more left of a man than there is of you I suppose he does what he can, poor wretch!"

Mr Sam Tebb's temper seemed to be even shorter than it used to be; the lady's retort seemed to deprive him of every vestige of self-control.

"You Jezebel!" he screeched.

He raised his stick, as if to hurl it at her, apparently oblivious of the fact of how much he himself stood in need of its support, with the result that, had not the detective supported him by slipping his arm about his shoulders, he would have dropped on to the floor. The burly man's comment on his behaviour was plain, if not comforting—especially when one considered what a Goliath Mr Tebb had recently been.

"None of that, you fool! You'd better keep your hands off the girl, even if you want to quarrel with her. By her looks I should say she could thrash you with her little finger." He questioned the lady in question. "Now, my girl, no more of this nonsense. What have you done with Jacob Gunston?"

"Don't you call me your girl, because I'm not your girl; and if every girl was of my mind they'd only use you policemen to wipe their boots on. As for your Jacob Gunston—don't know the gentleman—never set eyes on him since the day I was born."

"Oh, you haven't, haven't you? Then what have you done with your friend Bull's Eye, the American Champion Shootist?"

"Nothing."

"That's your tune, is it? Let me warn you that you won't do him a service by trying to keep him hidden."

"Much obliged for your warning—especially as I never asked for it."

The detective turned to the sergent-de-ville.

"You had better let your people search the room, though I'm afraid my man has given us the slip. Someone has given the girl the office, so that she was able to get him away before we came."

Ready-tongued Sally Price was derisive.

"That's right! run the rule over me! don't bother about my feelings—I suppose I didn't ought to have any. Search the room! search the house! search the whole neighbourhood for all I care! A nice lot of men you are, making free with a girl's belongings."

Miss Price stormed on; now in French, now in English;

now in a mixture of both. But her storming went unheeded, except by Mr Tebb, who kept up with her a running interchange of courtesies. They searched the room, turning everything upside down with a thoroughness which Sallie violently resented, or pretended to resent, because there was not improbably more than a touch of make-believe about her show of rage.

Having ransacked her room the intruders proceeded to act on the girl's ironical advice: they first went through every other room on the same floor, then through every apartment in the house. While the examination was going on a sergent-de-ville was left upstairs to keep Miss Price and Frank Thornton company—with the apparent intention of preventing their giving a hint to any person who might be concealed of what was going on.

The examination concluded, the detective addressed a few parting remarks to the mocking Sallie.

"He's done us again, has Jacob Gunston; thanks to you, I fancy. But don't you make any mistake: he's pretty nearly shot his bolt. They're looking out for him all over Europe. He's made himself pretty notorious, has your friend. I know for certain that he was in Rouen an hour ago; and you may take it from me we'll know where he is in an hour from now."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE TRAPPED SPARROW

"I SHOULDN'T be surprised if he was right," exclaimed Sallie when, the police having quitted the premises, she was alone again with Frank Thornton.

"And what if he is?" demanded Frank. "I tell you again that the man they're after is no more Jacob Gurston than you are, as he can prove with the greatest ease if he likes."

"That's all very well, but you don't know policemen as well as I know them; they're not so open to proof as you might think. Anyhow, they'd lock him up to start with, and, in his present state, that, alone, might be the death of him. No, thank you; if he's going to prove he's not the chap they're after I'd sooner he did it before they lay their hands on him, then there wouldn't be so much chance of his coming to any hurt through them!"

"You said he was going to Paris: have you recalled the name of the street he told you he was going to?"

"Rue du something, but I can't think what. All the time those animals were in the room I was racking my brains to try to think; but, although the name's almost at the tip of my tongue, I can't get it quite. It'll come to me all of a sudden, I know it will; but goodness only knows when that all of a sudden is going to be."

"And, in the meantime, what do you propose to do?"

"I'm going to Paris after him. The name of the street may come to me there, if it doesn't before; and, anyhow, I may find him without it."

"I, also, shall go to Paris."

"No one objects. I do believe that you're his friend; I'm sure that it's to do your sister a good turn he's gone. For her sake he'd think nothing of risking his life a dozen times a day. I shouldn't be surprised if he's risking it now; I've a sort of feeling that he is. I've a kind of an idea that that sister of yours has somehow got herself into a very awkward

hole, and, if she has, it's two to one that he tumbles into it also in his attempts to get her out. If he does, seeing that he's as weak as a baby, he'll be more in need of help than she is. It'll be all U P with him if help doesn't come in time."

"Then, if that really is your opinion, for heaven's sake do endeavour to recall the name of that street."

"I tell you I can't, I can't, I can't. Do you suppose I wouldn't if I could? All the while at the back of my head I'm struggling to get at it; the more I struggle the more it eludes me. If I could only give my brain a rest, and not try to think, then it might come; so, if you're going to Paris, off you go!"

"Can't we go together?"

"Not if I know it! I'm not quite such a simple child! Don't you know that one of those policemen is cooling his heels at the corner of the street? So soon as I show my face he'll shadow me. If I go to Paris they'll take it for granted that he's gone to Paris; and they might find him first, which wouldn't suit my book at all. No; you travel by yourself; put up at a respectable hotel, where I'll report myself as soon as I come."

"You promise?"

"Faithfully! I'll just let you have a slip of paper stating where I shall be at a certain hour; only I shall be there exactly five hours before the time stated. Five hours, you understand?" He nodded. "To-morrow morning I'll come on to Paris by a way of my own. I've given people the slip before to-day. I don't think it'll be so difficult to dodge these foreigners as perhaps they think."

On that understanding they parted. He wrote down the name of the hotel at which he proposed to stay: the Hotel Central, 40 Rue du Louvre; she slipped it into her bodice. As she had prophesied, dawdling at the corner of the street he perceived an individual who was unmistakably an agent of the police.

As it seemed to him to be a matter of indifference whether his movements were or were not spied upon he moved towards the man with the intention of addressing him. But, as he advanced the man retreated; he quickened his pace; the man quickened his—evidently the individual had no intention of being questioned. Thornton recognised the fact, at last,

with amusement. When he relinquished the chase the man was actually out of sight.

"If Miss Price had realised that our friend might have been so easily got rid of she might have taken advantage of my chasing him to get away herself."

He retraced his steps, to see what would happen. When he came in sight of the point from which he had started he was amazed to see, in the distance, dawdling at the street corner, a man who, if he was not the one he had just been chevying, was certainly a near relation. It began to dawn upon him that when, in France, the authorities set a watch upon a person they are not to be so easily bluffed as, in his haste, he had imagined. All the way to Paris, and all the way through the streets of Paris to his hotel, he had a curious, and by no means comfortable, feeling, that he was being shadowed, though, for the life of him, he could not have said, with any degree of certainty, by whom.

"What does it matter?" was the reflection with which he endeavoured to console himself. "All the police in Europe may know what I am doing for all I care. As for Otway, he has nothing to fear from them. If that girl is right he is much more likely to need their help."

How right "that girl" was he did not dream.

Three days passed. He saw nothing, heard nothing, of Miss Price. They were not pleasant days. On the contrary, in after years he was wont to look back at them as three of the most unpleasant days he had ever known. What had become of Sallie he had not the faintest notion, but he had plenty of fears. Had she boasted of being able to do more than she could perform? Instead of scoring off the police, had they scored off her? Was it possible that, remembering the name of the street which she had protested to him had escaped her memory, ignoring her promise, she had gone off to it on her own account, and so had fallen into a trap? She was not that kind of woman. He told himself, over and over again, that he was convinced that she was not that kind of woman; and yet—in what position was he if that was what she had done? He was divided between different impulses. Should he telegraph to her at Rouen, asking what she meant by her behaviour? The telegram, falling—as it probably would do—into the hands of others, would work more harm than good. Should he return, himself, to

Rouen and find out what was happening? That idea, he told himself, was utterly absurd. Wherever she was, the odds were a thousand to one that she was not still at Rouen, unless——

Unless what? Unless she was in trouble with the police. That fear so grew on him that he would have gone back to Rouen to see if there was anything in it had not, on the morning of the fourth day, something happened.

That was the day on which Donna Luisa D'Agostino and her husband, Bianchi, were to earn two hundred thousand pounds, and on which Mrs Frank Andrews was to journey to Paris, to see, with her own eyes, George Otway—dead.

Frank Thornton was finishing dressing when a waiter brought him an envelope, observing that it had just been brought by hand messenger and that the messenger had requested that it should be delivered at once. Frank tore it open. Within was a small slip of paper, on which was written in a firm, bold hand, "Boulevard Edgar Quinet. Cemetary gate. Three."

"That means, I suppose, that I am to meet Miss Price at the cemetery gate on the Boulevard Edgar Quinet five hours before three o'clock—that is, at ten sharp. It's past nine now: I shall have to bustle. Before I start I'd better know where I'm going to. What cemetery does she mean? and where's the Boulevard Edgar Quinet?"

With the aid of his map of Paris he made out that the cemetery in question was that of Montparnasse, in the Quartier du Montparnasse, and that the Boulevard Edgar Quinet was the road which ran along its northern boundary, not so very far from his own hotel.

It was not yet ten when a cab set him down at the corner of the boulevard; but so soon as he alighted he perceived on the other side of the road a feminine figure which he had no difficulty in recognising as that of the lady he had come to meet. The fashion of her greeting was not quite what he expected.

"Why ever did you take a cab? I hope you told him to drive half round Paris before he brought you here, or a police spy has got his eye glued on me already."

Frank glanced round. He saw no one whose appearance aroused suspicion; but then people were constantly passing to and fro, any one of them might be the spy in question. He addressed the lady.

"But why have you been so long? what has happened? A nice three days I've been having!"

"I give you my word I haven't had a nice time either, a pretty roundabout route I've had to take to get to Paris, and I shouldn't be surprised if the police have kept their eyes on me in spite of all the care I've taken. But I've thought of the name of the street. It only came to me last night as I was entering Paris, and after I'd given it up in despair: it's the Rue du Bois."

"The Rue du Bois? Where's that?"

"Why, just close to where we are; I found it on the map; that's why I asked you to meet me here. Come along, I'll show you."

As they went they met a small boy coming out of the cemetery gates. As soon as he was clear of the precincts, with a furtive look about him—possibly to see that he was safe from official interference—he produced from under cover of his jacket—a bird.

"Why, you naughty boy!" exclaimed Miss Price, whose sympathies were keen where birds were concerned. "It's a sparrow! a poor sparrow! What are you going to do with it? I believe you caught it in the cemetery. How dare you! Let it go at once."

The young gentleman resented her interference, judging from his sullen expression and grumbling tone.

"What's the good of letting it go? It can't fly; its wing's broken."

"Then you've broken it, you wicked child!"

The boy denied the accusation, stoutly.

"I haven't! It was caught in a trap, and I took it out; I haven't done anything to it at all."

"What is that fastened to its poor wing? Why, it's a piece of paper! How queer! how can it have got there! Take it off—gently! there may be something written on it; let's see what it is." The small boy removed the scrap of paper with such care as he was capable of. "Well!—is there anything on it?"

"There's something written, but I don't know what it is. I can't read writing."

He handed the paper to Miss Price, who read, with astonished eyes, and feelings which beggar description. She read first to herself; then she cried:

"Listen to this."

And then she read aloud to Frank Thornton:

"George Otway and Elsie Thornton are imprisoned in an attic at the top of the house in the Rue du Bois which is believed to be in the occupation of Donna Luisa D'Agostino. Anyone finding this, and who at once communicates with the police, and so effects a rescue, will receive from George Otway a reward of twenty-five thousand francs.—Signed GEORGE OTWAY."

About that time Mrs Frank Andrews was setting out for the house in the Rue du Bois to see George Otway—dead.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SERGEANT CUTFORTH

SALLIE Price and Frank Thornton stood staring at each other, face to face. Words failed them altogether. For the moment speech seemed ludicrously incapable of giving adequate expression to their feelings. The thing was so like a miracle. There was the small boy, gazing at them askance, open-eyed, open-mouthed. There was the bird, held in his two hands, which, despite its broken wing, the trap from which it had been just released, the captivity into which it had entered, still seemed in tolerable health and spirits, observing them with its bright, bead-like eyes, as if it also realised the singularity of the situation. The whole episode seemed, as it were, to have tumbled from the skies—at so apposite a moment, as in the fairy tales—that Frank Thornton seemed unable to realise that the thing was actual fact. His first question suggested the doubt which was in his mind.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"The whole affair! Don't you think it's possible that it's all a trick?"

"How a trick? I don't understand."

"Mayn't some of the people who have been favouring us with their attentions have been aware that we were coming here this morning and have got the boy, the bird, and the piece of paper ready for our arrival?"

Sallie addressed the lad.

"Did anyone tell you we were coming?"

The boy shook his head.

"I don't know what you mean."

"No, of course you don't—nor anyone else either." Then, to Frank: "Who on earth do you suppose would wish to amuse themselves by the manufacture of such a hoax? Here's the paper; look at it yourself; isn't that George Otway's writing?"

"I have only seen his handwriting once—in the letter which he wrote to my mother. So far as my recollections serves me, it resembles it."

"Of course it resembles it—it is it! I'm as sure of that as if I had seen him writing. George Otway and your sister are prisoners in that woman's house in the Rue du Bois, as the paper says. How long they've been there goodness only knows. It's for you and I to see that they don't stop there much longer." She began to scribble in a small memorandum book which was secured, by an elastic band, within her purse. "Boy, can I trust you to buy a small cage and to put that bird in it and to take it carefully to the Hotel du Géant, in the Rue Geoffroy? Then, if you give it with this note to the landlady, she'll hand you five francs."

The boy assured her eagerly that, to that extent, he could be trusted. He departed with the note and the bird.

"If all goes well," declared Miss Price, "that bird's provided with a comfortable home for the remainder of its life; it'll be the best-off sparrow that ever lived. Now for us it only remains to do the exact opposite of what I meant to do. The last three days I've been turning and twisting, dodging up and down France, doing all I knew to get the police off my scent, for though, thank my stars, I've never had anything to do with them myself, I've always had a kind of feeling that they're the sort of creatures I could never grow to love. Rather than go to them for help I'd sooner be diddled a bit; and I have been diddled more than once. But this is going to be a case in which, if we don't look out, the diddling's going to be on too large a scale; so, instead of keeping on running away from them, it strikes me that we'd better go to them instead. What do you think?"

"I'm entirely of your opinion. The only question in my mind is as to which is the nearest bureau de police."

"Over the road."

"Over the road?" Turning on his heels he stared in the direction indicated. "I see nothing to suggest a bureau de police."

"No? Well I do, right bang in front of where you're staring. Why, if you were to throw your stick straight enough it'd hit representatives of both English and French police; I've had my eye on them ever since you came. It just shows you that the police aren't always such fools as some people

think they are. The betting is that they've been shadowing you at that hotel of yours; that they got first peep at that note I sent you, and that in, consequence of what they saw in it, they resolved to accompany you in your walks abroad; and that, as a result, they've snapped the two of us together again."

"I don't in the least understand what you're talking about."

Frank Thornton was staring about him in all directions, as if endeavouring to light on something which could serve as a clue to the lady's meaning. Sallie laughed, as if she regarded his dulness as a compliment to her superior acumen.

"Bit slow, aren't you? and not quite so used to looking after yourself as I am. I spotted them as soon as you appeared; they were in a cab which was not a dozen yards behind yours. Come with me, I'll explain.

As he strode across the street he kept by her side. Bearing to her left she approached two individuals who were strolling leisurely along, as if in the enjoyment of a pleasant saunter. One of them was a rather good-looking man, clean shaved, except for a small moustache, who, by his general appearance, suggested, in some remote fashion, a connection with horses. His companion, with his grizzled hair and moustache and upright military bearing, would have been taken by most people for an old soldier. Both were well dressed, each was smoking a cigarette. Miss Price unceremoniously addressed the younger of the two, stretching out her hand and touching him on the arm.

"You are Sergeant Cutforth of Scotland Yard."

The individual addressed removed his hat.

"And you are Madeleine, the Greatest Bender the World has ever seen. You and I have had the pleasure of meeting before, Miss Price."

"Pleasure you call it! The pleasure was all on one side. You're after Jacob Gunston—that is, the person you suppose to be Jacob Gunston."

"Precisely—the person we suppose to be Jacob Gunston. I do not object to your definition in the least."

"That's very good of you, I'm sure. You always were a nice man, Mr Cutforth."

"I wish you had always thought so, Miss Price." It seemed to Thornton that the sergeant's words were followed by some-

thing like a sigh. The sergeant continued: "Permit me to introduce to you M. Marcel of the French surveillance."

"Surveillance? I suppose that's another word for spies, I know! How do?" Miss Price acknowledged M. Marcel's courteous bow with a perfunctory nod. She regarded the pair, for a second or two, in silence with looks which could hardly be considered flattering. "You think yourselves clever, you two, but you're not so clever as perhaps you think—not by a good long way. After Jacob Gunston, are you? And because, more by luck than anything else, you've stumbled on me again, you think you're not far off him."

Sergeant Cutforth's manner was still politeness itself.

"I acknowledge that we have some dim idea that the person in question may not be a thousand miles from where we're standing."

"Then you're wrong, because he's a good deal more than a thousand miles from here, seeing that he's dead and buried."

"Indeed. Is that so? Then how is it that you're not in mourning?"

"Why should I go into mourning for Jacob Gunston?—a man I never saw in my life?"

"Quite so; under those circumstances, why should you?"

"Sharp, aren't you? That always was a fault of yours—being too sharp. But, look here, I'm going to help you—you wouldn't ever be able to do anything without me—so I'm going to give you a helping hand. Not for love of you, mind, nor liking either." She added this, apparently, because, as she spoke of love, a sudden gleam had come into the sergeant's eyes. "Because I can't bear the sight of you—and never could."

"Thank you, Miss Price. You have told me that before."

The sergeant's tone blended humility with sorrow.

"Yes, and I tell you again; because, Tom Cutforth, that's something I don't want there to be any mistake about."

"I'm glad you've remembered my Christian name, Sallie."

"But don't you remember mine! or, if you do, don't you call me by it! I give you fair warning that I won't have it. Look here! look at that!"

She thrust the message which the sparrow had brought into the sergeant's hand. He stared at her, then at it; then he read the message to the end."

"What does it mean?" he asked. "George Otway? What George Otway is that? Not *the* George Otway; he's dead."

"That's where you and your too clever friends have all been making a mistake, as I've observed more than once already. It's Jacob Gunston who is dead. The man you've been making yourselves laughing-stocks about by chevying him all round the world is George Otway, who is very much alive—that is, if he's not been murdered by the time you get to that house in the Rue du Bois."

"Let me warn you that if what you say is incorrect the mistake will be detected so soon as I catch a glimpse of the man of whom we are speaking. I know George Otway by sight almost as well as I know you; no impostor will succeed in taking me in for a single instant."

"Then, Tom Cutforth, you're the very man who's wanted; because, if you're speaking by the book, you'll be able to dash aside at once the web of confusion which your colleagues have been weaving. Only, come at once!"

The sergeant turned to M. Marcel.

"Which house in the Rue du Bois is occupied by Donna Luisa D'Agostino?"

The Frenchman shook his head.

"Donna Luisa D'Agostino? Without referring I cannot tell you, but I will soon find out, if you wish to know."

"I do wish to know, with the least possible delay."

"There will be no delay whatever. We know who lives in every house, in every apartment, in Paris. We have but to glance at our lists; it is very simple."

But, in this case, it was not be so simple as M. Marcel would have liked Sergeant Cutforth to believe.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE CLANGING OF THE BELL

AND, in the meantime, in the house which they were setting out to find, events were moving fast. In a certain room Donna Luisa was closeted with her husband, Mr Bianchi. Neither seemed wholly at ease. The Mother of Caracas, clad in the dress of crimson satin, which she wore with such persistency that one was forced to wonder if she had vowed never to clothe herself in anything else, smoked, as usual, a huge cigar, while she reclined in an arm-chair which was sufficiently spacious to accommodate her generous figure. That the air of indifference with which she endeavoured to carry matters off was only superficial was shown, not only by the occasional working of her features, but also by the fact that her fingers, hands, and arms were in almost continual movement, as if they were afflicted by some muscular disease which rendered it impossible for her to keep them still.

Mr Bianchi's condition of nervous agitation was even more obvious than her own. He seemed incapable of sitting down; or if, for a moment, he occupied a chair, it was to rise from it again with a sudden start, as if inaction of any sort was wholly incompatible with his present mood.

The woman seemed to derive some uncanny satisfaction from mere observation of his fevered restlessness. She exhaled great volumes of tobacco smoke with curious puffed-out lips, denoting unusual gratification, as if that particular cigar was impregnated with some occult flavour.

"You have got rid of them?" she asked.

Before Bianchi answered he moved his right arm through the air, as if he were putting something from him. His voice was a little hoarse; his words showed a disposition to tumble over each other, as if he could not utter them rapidly enough.

"I have got rid of them—oh yes! But it was not easy."

"What did you say to them?"

"Lies—nothing but lies. My invention failed me; I could find nothing that was true to tell them."

There was an interval before she spoke again, during which she drummed with her finger-tips on the arms of her chair, and he prowled perpetually to and fro.

"I suppose — when they discover that you've told them nothing but lies—there'll be trouble."

"Trouble! my God!" He struck the palm of his hand with a passionate gesture against a table. "Understand plainly—after it is done, after it is all over—if by to-night we are not already safe beyond their reach, our lives will not be worth so much."

He snapped his fingers in the air.

"So bad as that? My life has often been threatened, yet I live."

"I, also; but it is not the same. What happened in Caracas I know; but neither you nor I have ever been in such danger as we shall be then. It is for a great stake we play."

"A great stake; the greater the better. It makes the game so much more worth the playing. Is that not so?"

"I am not so sure that it is desirable to play for quite so great a stake."

"You would divide with those others?"

"I do not know that I would have divided. But now that it is too late I am not certain that it would not have been worth our while to have given them something in order to have them on our side."

"Bianchi, you're a fool."

"I believe you have told me that already; that is not the point. If we had given them something we should have made them our accomplices; we might even have put the whole business upon them. They would have held their tongues for their own sakes. Now, when they come back again, when they discover that they have been tricked, that we have gone, that this fellow and the girl have gone, they will raise a hue and cry: they will set all Europe at our heels. You do not understand what it means when, in a transaction of this kind, the subject is an Englishman."

"You do not understand that, if you had taken those others into our confidence, they would not have been content with what we chose to give: we should have had to give them what they chose to ask."

"There is truth in that—there is a great deal of truth."

"There is nothing but truth. Two hundred thousand

pounds between you and me is one thing, between a dozen persons it is quite another."

"That, again, is true."

"I prefer to play the great game—for the great stake. As for those others, let them do their worst."

"They will do it, of that you may be sure. If we could get to South America, to that place we know of, before this time to-morrow, I would care nothing; I should laugh in their faces. But to get there takes so long—so many things may happen on the way—it is that of which I am always thinking."

"You are, then, a coward."

"Am I a coward? You know if I am a coward! Answer me, am I a coward?"

He confronted her with that in his face, his eyes, his bearing, before which even her indomitable spirit seemed, for a second, to quail. But it was only for a second. Presently, laughing in his face, she blew a great cloud of tobacco smoke, which ascended in spiral rings to the ceiling.

"No scenes, if you please, especially when you and I are alone together. I know you as well—better—than you know me. I know the stuff that you are made of. And yet I say again that, if you fear the consequences of what you do, to that extent, you are a coward. As for me, I fear nothing—neither heaven nor hell, not even the guillotine or the gallows. I have that here which will preserve me from them both." She tapped her bodice with the tip of her finger. "Money I must have, I will have—a great deal of money—a little is no use. You robbed me once of millions, you shall not rob me again. I will make to you a proposition. Leave the house at once. I will go through this business single-handed. I will take the two hundred thousand pounds all to myself. Afterwards you can join those others in setting the police upon me as you will. Will that please you?"

"Not at all!"

"What is it, then, that you want? Come, Bianchi, get those cobwebs out of your brain. If you were more like me—if you looked neither to the right nor to the left, neither behind nor in front, but simply at the object you have in view—you would be a happier, a stronger, a more successful man. Now let us reach the point. What have you decided? Is it to be the pit?"

"There, again, I am uncertain. This Mrs Andrews, when she comes, is she to see them both: the man and the girl?"

"What does it matter? So far as she is concerned, nothing would please her better. She hates George Otway with such a hatred that to see beside his dead body the dead body of the woman whom he loved—that, I think, would be her idea of perfect bliss."

"She is a nice creature!"

"Else we should not be able to earn so easily two hundred thousand pounds."

"Easily? you call it easily! Wait till afterwards."

Donna Luisa was silent. A very unpleasant look came on her naturally unpleasant face. Bianchi's back chanced to be turned towards her at the moment, a fact of which she took advantage to stretch out her arms in front of her and to go through the pantomime of squeezing something between her massive fingers. It seemed not impossible that, with every appearance of enjoyment, in her mind's eye she was strangling him. If such were the case, when she spoke again she did not allow her amusing make-believe to affect either her manner or her voice.

"This Otway, he is nearly dead already, is he not?"

"So nearly that, in a day or two, he'd be quite, with but little assistance from anything but nature."

"And the girl?"

"She's alive enough, the vixen! But for her he'd have been dead; it's she who's kept him alive."

"It is not of much consequence. They will go together, that is all. For her the pit will do."

"The pit!"

As Bianchi echoed her words there was heard the clanging of a bell. Had it been the harbinger of some hideous catastrophe the sound could hardly have affected its hearers more. They started, seemed to hold their breath, listened intently, looked at each other with furtive, guilty glances. The man was more affected than the woman. A curious whiteness showed through his sallow skin, his lips twitched, his eyes moved jerkily in their sockets as if they were beyond his control. For some moments neither spoke: there was perfect silence; then the clanging came again

"Who is it?" asked the woman.

He had to moisten his lips before he was able to answer.

"I don't know."

"I suppose a tradesman, or some person of that kind."

"May be."

"You had better go and discover who it is."

He had to moisten his lips again.

"Why not you?"

"Me? I do not answer bells. To that I have not yet descended. Are you afraid?"

This time he did not show resentment at the imputation of cowardice which the question conveyed. Not impossibly he was endeavouring to find an excuse which would render it unnecessary for him to do as she suggested. The clanging came a third time.

"Bianchi, you will go and see who is there, at once! I do not wish to have a crowd at my street door. You hear?"

She spoke to him as she might have done to a dog, or a lackey. There was that in her tone which rendered it impossible for him to indulge in further procrastination. He grumblingly obeyed.

"Very well, I am going, there is no need to make a fuss."

He went out of the room. When he was gone, taking her cigar out of her mouth, she attentively regarded the long ash at the tip.

"He is like the rest," she said to herself, "no good. When it comes to the point he trembles. There is fear at the bottom of his heart. I will not share my two hundred thousand pounds with him. Why should I? There is no reason. I would rather—I would rather——"

She took from a table which was within reach of her outstretched arm what resembled, more than anything else, a gigantic bodkin, or a stout knitting needle with a pointed tip. It was set in a handle which seemed unduly heavy for so slender a weapon, for, apparently, it was as a weapon it was intended to be used; though, as she trifled with it, one began to perceive the intention of the weighted handle.

"So thin it hardly leaves a scar though driven in to the hilt. It is as if some pin had pricked, and yet behind it there's balance enough, if you select the proper spot, to drive it to the hilt with but the slightest exertion of strength, with but a little turn of the wrist."

Bianchi crossed the courtyard with lingering steps and slow. As he went the bell clanged out once more.

"You're in a hurry, whoever you are," he muttered.

Opening the trap, he looked out, prepared to pour a volley

of abuse on the unwelcome visitor. What he saw seemed to freeze the words upon his lips. Without stood a lady dressed in the height of fashion.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I! Is it so surprising, then, that I come a little before the appointed time?"

He unfastened the door with what, for the nonce, were awkward hands, greeting her with stammering lips.

"Ten thousand pardons, madam, for keeping you so long outside the gate, but we were not expecting visitors; you, in particular, we did not expect until to-night."

"I changed my mind, and crossed last night. I remembered that to-night I have an engagement in London which I would not care to miss. I leave Paris this afternoon at four, and, reaching London before eleven, shall be able to dress and be in time for my engagement."

"You leave Paris this afternoon at four? But——" he hesitated, as if at a loss for a phrase, "we are not yet ready."

"No; so I supposed. But you will be before I go; and —I shall be able to see the fun."

She smiled; there was something in the quality of her smile which made him shiver.

"The fun?" he gasped.

"Yes; the fun. Why do you stare at me like that? I thought when I rang and rang, and no one answered, that you had been playing without me after all, that the house was deserted—empty."

"There are in it only my wife and I."

"Only?"

His glance fell.

"Of course he is also here, and the girl."

"The girl?"

"You did not know that the girl was here?"

She shook her head.

"I know nothing. I have everything to learn—to see. That is why I am come."

"My wife will tell you. She will explain better than I can."

He conducted her into the house. He observed the dainty figure, as she tripped before him up the stairs, with curious gaze. She was dressed as for a *fête*: silken frills and furbelows gleamed beneath her uplifted skirt; her fripperies

filled the whole place with their rustling as she ascended. He ushered her into his wife's presence.

"It is Mrs Andrews, who has arrived already."

Donna Luisa still toyed with that slender, bodkin-like weapon. She did not rise as her visitor entered. With a dexterous movement of her lips she merely transferred her cigar from one side of her mouth to the other.

"Already? Although you did not let us understand that you would come so soon, I wish you, Mrs Frank Andrews, a very good day."

She spoke with that peculiar air of grimness which was not the least striking of her characteristics. The new-comer stared at her with frank astonishment. And, indeed, she did present a singular spectacle, with her face of a man and her form of a woman, her huge frame encased in that startling expanse of shimmering crimson.

"Are you smoking a cigar?"

"I am always smoking a cigar. I have smoked cigars since I was as high as this chair. In my country it is not unusual for women."

"How extremely odd! I devour cigarettes, but I have never yet ventured on a cigar. I should never dare."

"Bianchi, give to Mrs Frank Andrews a cigarette."

Mr Bianchi did as he was told. The little lady, arranging herself in an arm-chair at her ease, lighted the cigarette which he brought her, fondling it with her pretty lips.

"This is delightful—quite an adventure. One feels that one's doing what one didn't ought to do, and it's always comfortable to feel that you are doing that."

"I daresay you are right. No doubt it is like that with some, but with me it is different. I have always done what I ought not to do; so I am accustomed."

"I should think you were more—I should think you are bored. It must be so tiresome to be the same thing always. Like the man in the poem—isn't it a poem?—you ought to be everything by turns, and nothing long; nice to-day, and nasty to-morrow; awfully good, then awfully wicked; anything for a change. A new sensation's everything—the old ones pall. As long as you can keep on getting new sensations life needn't be such bad fun as some people seem to think."

"I'm sure you don't think it's bad fun."

"No-o." The little lady suffered the cigarette smoke to issue from her lips with, as it were, a contemplative air. "Sometimes it's pretty dull; at others, it's absolutely stupid; when things don't go, and won't go, as you want them, it's horrid. But—on the whole—it's bearable. A moment like this, for instance, is well worth living for."

"You flatter us."

The little lady stared, for a moment, as if she did not quite catch the other's meaning. Then she broke into her merry little laugh.

"It wasn't my intention, and I'm afraid you don't quite understand me. You see—I don't altogether love—George Otway."

"So I imagined."

"In fact, I hate him."

"That, also, I was so presumptuous as to take for granted."

"And when I hate a person—really!—I want to tear them to pieces with red-hot pincers, and to take my time in doing it."

"I know. There have been occasions when I, also, have felt like that."

"Is that so? How very interesting! Then you'll understand my feelings. Is he dead?"

"Not yet. It was agreed, you will remember, that you should not arrive until this evening. We could not very well proceed with the business until certain matters were arranged."

"I see. I'm glad you didn't. I came so early because I hoped to be in time to see him killed." Bianchi, behind the speaker's back, made an odd little gesture with the palms of his hands, possibly intended to be expressive of disgust. His wife did not move a muscle. Mrs Andrews went serenely on. "Your husband speaks about a girl, what does he mean?"

"It is Elsie Thornton—it is the woman Otway loves. They are fellow-prisoners."

"The woman he loves? So there is a woman. I might have guessed that, before this, he would have found one." Mrs Andrews drew a long breath; then her lips closed tightly; there seemed to be a glittering spark in the pupils of her eyes. "And they are fellow-prisoners? How excessively amusing. What do you propose to do with her?"

"We shall have to kill her also, it will be the only way of shutting her mouth."

"Quite so; of course you will have to kill her. How nice! You put these things with a frankness which I find delightful." Mrs Andrews, smiling, closed her eyes, as if the better to enjoy some delightful vision. "And what is your mode of procedure?"

"That was what we were discussing, Bianchi and I: your coming so early will make it simpler."

"I am so glad."

"There is, in the cellar, a kind of a pit. It is very deep. It was perhaps once the shaft of an old well. We thought that we would throw them into it. When it is covered there is nothing in the floor to show that there is anything unusual beneath. Their skeletons might not be found for half-a-century. The only difficulty was that you wished to see George Otway dead. We could not very well show you him at the bottom of the pit. Now, however, it is different."

"Exactly. What a capital idea! What a very useful thing to have in a house. Only—would they know that you were going to throw them into this—funny place?"

"We might tell them."

"Of course; and paint to them the dreadful fate for which they were destined, depict the horrors which were in the pit. Then you might push them into it, cover it over, and let them die in the darkness at the bottom. How delightful! I shall dream of it. I shall dream that I can hear them calling for help out of the bowels of the earth; that I can see their struggles, their anguish, as, by degrees, they recognise that, for them, there is no hope. Then I shall see them die, the flesh drop off their bones, until nothing but their skeletons remain at the bottom of the pit. It will be worth while going to sleep to enjoy such dreams as those."

Again there was that little gesture from Bianchi, and this time a comment from his wife.

"You have a pretty fancy, madam."

"Oh yes; I have a pretty fancy: where George Otway is concerned a very pretty fancy, I assure you. But let us pass from fancies to facts. Show me this gentleman and this lady, and let us open the ball. I do not wish to stay here longer than I can help."

Rising, the little lady tossed the end of her cigarette into

the fireplace. Donna Luisa regarded her intently before she answered.

"Quite so, madam. But before, as you put it, we open the ball, have you with you the sum which was agreed?"

"I have with me two hundred thousand pounds in the bank-notes of all nations, in accordance with your own suggestion. It was not easy to get them in so short a time, but there are ways and means. Here they are." She took a pocket-book from the gold chain-bag which was slung to her waist. Husband and wife exchanged glances, which their visitor, intercepting, apparently interpreted in a fashion of her own. "You may examine them, if you please, to see that the amount is correct and that they are genuine; but I should advise you that my husband has the numbers. If I do not leave the house before three o'clock payment will be stopped; should anyone leave it before I do that person will be the object of most unwelcome attentions."

There was more than a trace of resentment in Donna Luisa's tone as she responded.

"What does madam mean by her most singular observations?"

The little lady had, all at once, that in her demeanour which, not improbably, took the elder woman aback.

"What I say. Do you suppose I would trust myself in such a house as this with such a sum of money in my possession without taking due precautions? I am not so simple. You might find it easier to kill me than to kill George Otway, of whose presence here I have, as yet, no guarantee save your bare word. The whole thing, for all I know, may be a trick and a trap. So, before I came, I made a certain communication to a certain personage at the Quai des Orfevres, with whose name and office you are probably both of you familiar, in consequence of which at this moment all Paris may be said to have its eyes upon this house."

Bianchi was moved to sudden excitement.

"Do you dare to tell us you have communicated with the police?"

"I do: I have."

"What have you told them?"

"That is my affair and theirs. You need not glare at me like that, my man. You will not make me afraid. It is you who have cause for fear, not I. Carry out your undertaking,

I am willing to share your guilt, to be your accomplice—it is for that purpose I am here—and all will be well. I will go as I came, leaving the money behind me. You will be free to go or stay as you choose; in any case the incident will be closed. I will take care that the police do nothing, for my own sake as well as yours. But tamper with our agreement, show a disposition to depart from it by so much as a hair's breadth, and nothing in this wide world will be able to save you from the righteous anger of the law. Surely you must know that a person who gives you two hundred thousand pounds as if it were nothing is a person of importance; one who in France can pull the strings which agitate these gentlemen of the police pretty well as she pleases. If you did not know so much you must be foolish."

"Madam speaks strongly, she says plainly what she means. But, my wife and I, we do not resent madam's freedom of speech—not at all.

The little lady interrupted him with an impatient movement of her hand.

"Let us to business! Where is our friend and the girl?"

"They are above. Madam might first like to see the pit, which is below."

"Come, let us go now at once!"

The three descended to the cellar, which was below the basement; for some reason of her own Donna Luisa chose to form one of the party. The walls were of brick, the floor was of cement. There was nothing about the appearance of this latter, which was covered with an untidy litter, to attract attention. Bianchi, taking off his coat and waistcoat, proceeded to remove a pile of the wooden billets which the French call *charbon de bois*. Then, with the aid of a long iron bar, he prised up first one block of cement, then a second, and a third; the result being an oblong cavity, which, for all that could be seen, might have led into the very bowels of the earth. Affixing a lamp to a piece of cord he lowered it into the opening.

"You see, madam, it is not shallow. Here are more than twenty feet of cord. I let it all out; yet you can see nothing of the bottom." He gave the lamp a swinging motion. "It is not narrow, there is room to move about. When two people are buried alive in so deep a grave it is no harm that they have a little space to move about."

Mrs Andrews laughed.

"Not at all. They will live the longer, and suffer more. But where is this pretty pair?"

"The pretty pair, who are to be so shortly at the bottom of the house, are at present at the top. Will it please madam to ascend?"

"It will please me very much." The three went up, and up, and up. The little lady found the ascent a trifle trying. "It is a long way to the top."

"Oh yes, madam; it is also a long way to the bottom. At last we are arrived." He paused outside a door which was at the head of a rudimentary flight of stairs which resembled a ladder leading to a loft. Unlocking it with a great key which he had carried in his hand he threw it open. "Here, madam, is your pretty pair."

Mrs Andrews could probably not have described what she expected to see, but it was certainly not what she actually saw: a bare attic, with a slanting roof, descending, at one point, almost to the floor. Air and light were only admitted by an opening in the roof, perhaps twelve inches square. On the bare boards lay the figure of a man. As the delicate lady of fashion entered this singular apartment, holding an exquisite lace handkerchief to her dainty nostrils, an object came fluttering towards her, which was presumably a woman, though the altogether indescribable state of her general appearance made momentary hesitation on the point at least excusable. She addressed herself to Mrs Andrews with a timid, awkward air, as if she were frightened at the sound of her own voice.

"You have come to save him? at last! I hope it's not too late: I'm afraid he's dead."

"Dead? I hope not. That would be to cheat me, indeed, and, as you say, at last!" She picked her way to where the man was lying, tapping him with the toe of her little shoe. "George—George Otway! He's not dead, I thought fortune would hardly serve me so scurvily as that!"

The man, with a deliberation which suggested infinite weariness, turned his head and looked at her.

"You!" he muttered. "I have suffered many things because of you in dreams."

"I have suffered a few things because of you, George. I am hopeful that, in the future, my dreams will wear a different complexion. I'm glad you know me. I really doubt if I

should have recognised you : you look as if you had been dead for years. But please don't die just yet, that wouldn't be at all amusing." She turned to Bianchi. "How are you going to get him down? He can't walk : if you drag him he'll be dead before you get him to the bottom."

"I will carry him—he is nothing but skin and bone—I am strong enough."

"Then carry him, quickly!"

Taking the recumbent figure in his arms Bianchi bore it from the room. The woman exhibited symptoms of distress.

"What are you going to do with him? where are you taking him?"

"I will tell you : we are taking him down to the pit, to bury him alive, and we are going to bury you with him. You understand? Drive her after—George!"

Mrs Andrews made an imperious gesture to Donna Luisa, who, in turn, motioned to the girl. Without offering the faintest remonstrance the girl quitted the room, suffering Donna Luisa to, literally, drive her in front of her down the stairs. As she went she whimpered, as a child might have done.

When they reached the cellar they found that Bianchi had laid George Otway down.

"Hold him up," commanded the little lady.

Bianchi, putting his arm about Otway's waist, supported him, so that he could look down into the opening which yawned at his feet.

"Hold her also!"

Donna Luisa, obeying her peremptory visitor, gripped Elsie in such fashion that she also was compelled to stand on the brink of the gaping chasm.

"George!—my dear woman!—do you know what that is? That is a pit, a pit which goes deep down into the earth. There are all sorts of horrors at the bottom. We are going to throw you into it, to keep them company. We are going to shut you up in it, in the darkness, and we are going to leave you in it for ever. You understand? For ever!—— What's that?"

"That" was the same sound which had startled Donna Luisa : the clanging of a bell.

"If it's your police!" exclaimed Donna Luisa.

Donna Luisa made a sudden movement towards Mrs

Andrews. It almost seemed as if, with one hand, she would have snatched the gold chain-bag which dangled at her waist, and, with the other, would have precipitated her into the "pit." But the little lady was too quick. As she sprang back it was seen that she held a revolver, produced she alone knew from where. There was a flash, a report, a cry of pain from Donna Luisa, and, once more, the clanging of a bell.

CHAPTER XL

THE PIT

IT was M. Durocq of the Service de la Sureté who rang the bell at the door of that house with the crimson blind in the Rue du Bois once, twice, thrice, and yet again, with but short intervals, it is true, between each ringing. He was a tall, not ill-looking man, who wore a *pince-nez* and a top hat, and who had nothing about him which, to an English mind, suggested the police. When he had rung a fourth time Sergeant Cutforth said:

"It's no use. If they hear they won't answer. Perhaps, after all, the house is empty."

"It is not empty. It is but a short time since the English lady, Madam Andrews, was admitted at this gate. She is still within."

Miss Price interposed some observations of her own.

"She means mischief, that woman. Heaven help George Otway if she has him at her mercy. She'd think no more of killing him than a cat would of killing a mouse."

Miss Price's outspokenness incurred the French official's displeasure.

"Such remarks are out of order. This is not the place in which they ought to be made. I must ask you, mademoiselle, to keep silence." Beckoning to a subordinate, M. Durocq pointed to the door. "You have keys—open."

The subordinate, inserting a key in the lock, opened, with as matter-of-fact an air as if the door had been his own. In all, ten persons entered: M. Durocq and six subordinates, Sergeant Cutforth, Sallie Price, and Frank Thornton. Other officers of police were left in the street without, with instructions to allow the gate to remain open and to keep both eyes and ears on the alert for what was passing within. M. Durocq commenced proceedings by walking into the *concierge's* room—to find it empty.

"At least," he announced, "there is no one here."

The man with the keys volunteered a statement.

"The *concierge* is a woman named Marie Gagnol. She was here this morning at half-past nine. I saw her standing at the gate, looking out into the street."

M. Durocq shrugged his shoulders.

"Since half-past nine there has been time for a good many things to happen. Marie Gagnol may yet appear to explain how it is she is not at her post. What have we here? Ah! it is Madame Andrews."

Indeed, as he spoke, that dainty little lady came tripping down the stairs, pausing, half-a-dozen steps from the bottom, to stare, with an air of innocent surprise, at the small army of the invaders. She was a trifle flushed; but, beyond that, she was as spick and span as if she had just stepped out of a bandbox.

"Why," she exclaimed, with a charming appearance of surprise, "whatever is the matter? Can it be—it is M. Durocq."

"Precisely, madam." M. Durocq bowed—as only a Frenchman can. "Madam has seen her friends?"

"My friends?" One might have imagined that there was just a trace of embarrassment in the little lady's manner. But, if so, it passed as quickly as it came. She smiled sweetly. "Oh yes, of course. So good of you to inquire and to be so anxious; but everything has passed off most delightfully." She came down to the bottom step. Her tone dropped to a confidential whisper: "M. Durocq, I am having *déjeuner* at the Ritz. I hope—I shall be so glad if you will favour me with your company; will you?"

She looked up at him with that in her eyes which was something more than a delicate compliment.

"Madam flatters me; I am too much honoured. There is a little matter which I must settle first. How was it that no one came to open for us when we rang?"

This time she did not turn a hair. The exhibition of her surprise at such a curious question being addressed to her was perfect.

"Why no one came to open for you when you rang? I have not the faintest notion. Did no one come? This is not my house; I am not the *concierge*."

"But that is evident madam. There appears to be no *concierge*. Madam's friends—Donna Luisa D'Agostino, and M. Bianchi—are both upstairs?"

Again that pretty smile seemed, as it were, to be eclipsed, just for the moment.

"As for Donna Lusia, I am not quite certain, though I was talking to her only a few seconds ago. M. Bianchi I have just left upon the stairs."

"So M. Bianchi, at least, is above. We will ascend, and pay him a little call."

"By all means, if you choose, though I can't imagine what you'll find to say to him. Then I shall see you at the Ritz; when? in half-an-hour?"

He merely bowed over the small gloved hand which she extended as if to bid him adieu.

"I said, madam, we will ascend to call on M. Bianchi."

"Well, my good sir, go! I have no desire to keep you! only tell me first about the Ritz."

"Madam still a little fails to understand. When I said we will ascend, I meant that madam will do us the pleasure to ascend with us."

"I! my charming M. Durocq? I have seen all of M. Bianchi that I wish to; my business with him is finished, such as it was."

"Our business is still to begin."

"Yours; but what has your business to do with me? Monsieur forgets that my time in Paris is limited; in the meantime, I starve. Come—when you have called on M. Bianchi, who is not himself so agreeable a person that I would wish, myself, to see him so soon again—to the Ritz, and tell me all about it."

"A thousand pardons if we should seem to delay madam; but I must request her to introduce me to her friends Donna Luisa D'Agostino and M. Bianchi at once, if madam pleases."

"And if I don't please?"

"But madam will please."

When he said that, and she observed his tone and manner, and saw those who were behind him, she must have known that she was going to her doom as certainly as the pinioned wretch knows it who is hurried through tortuous passages, jostled into the open air, to find himself confronted in the half light of the early dawn by the guillotine. But not a sign escaped her that she had such knowledge. With a musical little laugh and a gay little pout she turned — to reascend to where she knew her doom awaited her.

"My very charming M. Durocq, you're a humorist. Evidently it does not matter that I starve? However, I shall eat the better when, at last, I get a chance."

"Madam will conduct us to the apartment where we shall find her friends."

"I will conduct you to the apartment where I found them; I cannot say whether you will. We are arrived." She threw open the door outside which she had paused. "M. Bianchi, here is M. Durocq of the Service de la Sureté, who has come to see you: I have not the faintest idea about what."

The gentleman in question went into the room, uninvited.

"Your warning to your friend, madam, was unnecessary, since M. Bianchi is not here."

There was a significance in the speaker's tone which could hardly have escaped the lady's notice.

"My warning, my dear M. Durocq, what do you mean? And as for M. Bianchi not being in this room, perhaps he is in the next. I suppose, in his own house, he is at liberty to go where he pleases; it was here I saw him."

But Mr Bianchi was not in the next room, nor in the next; nor, if they could trust the evidence of their own eyes, in any of the rooms in which they looked—and they searched them all. In none of them was anything to be seen of him, or his wife either. M. Durocq commented on the fact, with ironical courtesy.

"It is strange, madam, that this lady and gentleman should have vanished so soon as you removed from them the light of your countenance."

Mrs Andrews, ignoring the irony, appeared to be as puzzled as they were.

"It is odd: not ten seconds before I saw you M. Bianchi was with me on the staircase."

"And his wife?"

"His wife I had not seen for some minutes; I don't know where she was."

"You don't know where she was! Is that so? Where was she when you saw her last?"

"She was—oh, she was in that room, to which I took you first."

"You are sure that she was in that room?"

"Of course; what do you mean?"

"I thought that madam hesitated, as if she were in doubt.

We are still not yet at the top of the house, perhaps this lady and gentleman are in the garrets."

"If so, they would surely hear you moving about and come down to see who you were, and what you wanted."

"One would suppose it, but perhaps madam's friends are a little singular."

"I wish you would not persist in calling them my friends. I know nothing of them; I did not even hear of their existence until a few hours ago."

"Madam came from England to see persons of whom she knew nothing—does that not seem curious?"

They had reached the foot of the stairway leading to the room which had so recently served as a prison. The door was still wide open, a fact of which she endeavoured to make capital. She could not have desired them to ascend to the top of that staircase: it was worth her while to snatch at anything which would prevent their doing that.

"Obviously there is no one up there, the door is wide open; it is probably some sort of loft. You need not give yourself the pain to look for M. Bianchi in a loft."

M. Durocq regarded her with a singular gleam in the eyes which were behind the glasses.

"Madam thinks not. I am so unfortunate as to be of a different opinion. I will not only give myself the pain to ascend, but I must request madam to ascend with me."

For the first time the little lady showed signs of mutiny.

"I will ascend with you? Monsieur goes too far. I have had enough of this wild-goose chase. Monsieur will excuse me. I go to the Hotel Ritz, where monsieur will find me at his service." She turned to find two men at the head of the staircase behind her who barred the way. She addressed herself to them. "Have the goodness to let me pass."

They continued motionless, an answer came from M. Durocq.

"I regret infinitely to have to detain you, madam, but—you cannot pass until you have ascended."

"I cannot pass! M. Durocq, your conduct becomes more extraordinary every moment! Why should I go with you into an empty garret?"

"Because you have no alternative."

"No alternative! Really, this is outrageous."

"Does madam wish that I should explain?"

"I wish it very much indeed."

M. Durocq took from his pocket-book a letter-case, from the letter-case a slip of paper. He read aloud what was written on this slip of paper.

"'George Otway and Elsie Thornton are imprisoned in an attic at the top of the house in the Rue du Bois which is believed to be in the occupation of Donna Luisa D'Agostino. Anyone finding this and who at once communicates with the police, and so effects a rescue, will receive from George Otway a reward of twenty-five thousand francs.—Signed George Otway.' That is my explanation, madam."

The little lady had perceptibly changed countenance while he had been reading; there was a distant tremor in her speech.

"What is it you are reading from? I don't understand in the least."

"I think, on the contrary, that madam understands very well. It is to see George Otway that madam is here."

"To see George Otway! What nonsense are you talking about?"

"I am sorry madam finds that the truth is nonsense. It would seem that this is the room, at the top of the house, in which George Otway was imprisoned, until madam arrived. As it is now empty, what has become of George Otway, since madam's arrival, and of M. Bianchi, and of Donna Luisa D'Agostino?"

"I have not the faintest notion: you're talking double Dutch so far as I'm concerned. What is that paper from which you were reading, and where did you get it from?"

"Those are questions to which madam will probably receive an answer later on. At present our only concern is to know what has become of the persons I have named. If madam will permit me to advise her, as a friend, she will give us information on that point without delaying us further."

"But I've no information to give! I've told you all I know! I was never spoken to like this before!" Raising her veil she applied a tiny lace handkerchief to her eyes, but whether it was for the purpose of drying her tears there was no evidence to show. "Anyone might think that I'd been doing something wrong."

"We will hope that madam has been doing nothing wrong—we will hope so. But since madam declines to give me the information I require——"

"Declines! why do you say I decline when I have none to give?"

M. Durocq went on, heedless of the lady's interruption.

"It becomes necessary that I should examine the house thoroughly, and that, in that examination, I should be favoured with madam's company. I shall have pleasure in following madam up that staircase."

Since it was plain that M. Durocq was bent upon her going up into the garret, the little lady yielded. The exploring party consisted of five: M. Durocq and the little lady, Miss Price and Frank Thornton, and Sergeant Cutforth. They had only to put their faces inside the open door to perceive that this was indeed a chamber of horror. The Frenchman gave voice to the general feeling.

"I fear, madam, that someone has been doing wrong, very wrong indeed." The little lady was content to keep silence, and to dab at her eyes with her handkerchief. M. Durocq went on. "There is evidence here, of a kind, and to spare, but the chief evidence has been removed. For that we shall have to seek elsewhere. Madam, if you please."

He ushered her down, the others followed. They returned to the courtyard, where M. Marcel awaited their arrival. Of him M. Durocq made an inqury.

"Has anything occurred?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"No one has attempted to leave the house?"

"Not a creature, not a sound has been heard, not a person has been seen. It is like a house of the dead."

"It is strange. Madame Andrews says that she left her—acquaintances only a few seconds before we came, yet we have been all over the house, and there is not a trace of them to be found."

"There is still the basement!"

"Exactly, there is still the basement. It is there we are now about to proceed. But—the basement! It must be for some droll reason that this lady and gentleman should wish to establish themselves in such a quarter."

Mrs Andrews, accentuating the air of injury which she had recently assumed, pretended to take it for granted that at last she was at liberty to go.

"I suppose that now I may go and have some breakfast with M. Durocq's very kind permission. I presume that even

he will not imagine that it is necessary that I should descend with him into the depths, a part of the world into which hitherto business has not called me, and where I certainly have never been."

M. Durocq remained civil, but inexorable.

"It distresses me to have to continue to present myself in so disobliging a light, but I should have thought that, under the circumstances, madam would have been as anxious to discover what has become of her friends as I am."

"I tell you again, they are not my friends! How often am I to repeat it?"

"There is at least a mystery, the mystery of what has become of these two persons. Can they have vanished into air? There is the problem. Madam cannot but be interested in its solution."

"I am not interested, not the faintest atom. Now, my good, dear, charming M. Durocq, do be reasonable! Let me go and have my breakfast,—consider! I have only had one cup of coffee and one roll since yesterday; then you can come and tell me all about what you call your problem while I am eating; I will hear you with the greatest pleasure right to the end. Only, at present, do not persist in dragging me about this horrid old house, as if I were desirous of peering into every cupboard with a view of becoming its next tenant, which, I assure you, I am not."

"I implore madam's forgiveness in that I am compelled to request her to honour me with her presence in the basement."

The lady's little hands fell to her sides, and became clenched fists. Her eyes gleamed. She all at once grew angry.

"So! It is like that! You mean to insult me?"

"I do not insult; I only insist."

"I won't go! I sha'n't go into your horrid, dirty, dark, underground places! I am an English lady, and you have no right to make me go where I don't choose."

"Madam has some particular reason why she does not wish to descend into the basement."

They looked at each other; the English lady seemed to see something in the Frenchman's calm, equable, unblinking gaze which had on her a singular effect. Her own glance fell, her bearing seemed to change, she faltered in her speech.

"You—you have no right to say that."

"Not when madam risks so much by a refusal."

"Risks! What do you mean? What do I risk?"

M. Durocq was suavity itself, and as inflexible as suave.

"Madam will do me the favour to descend with us?"

And madam did him that further favour. What were her feelings as she went she alone could tell. She still bore herself with as much gaiety as was becoming in a person whose sense of dignity had been wounded, and she never lost for a moment that air of dainty breeding which marked her as the finest of fine ladies. Yet, when she thought of what there was below, to which each step brought them closer, as she could not help but think, there must have been a strange turmoil in her delicate bosom. She knew that each tread which led to that basement was taking her farther from High Dene than ever, and from all that High Dene meant, and nearer to that termination on which she had not reckoned when she set out on that day's adventure.

In the basement itself nothing was found—that is, nothing out of the common, as she was aware that there would not be. There were the kitchen, servants' offices, and two small rooms which had recently been used as bedrooms. The beds they contained were all tossed and tumbled, and the clothes in disorder, as if the person who was responsible had not yet had an opportunity to give them her attention.

M. Durocq accompanied his recognition of the fact that his researches were still uncrowned by success with that little movement of his shoulders which seemed to give to his words so much more meaning than they in themselves possessed.

"The problem of the evanishment of this lady and gentleman, madam, continues to be a problem; one which, for my part, grows each moment in interest. It would almost appear that we have explored the entire premises."

"There are here, behind this door, some stairs which probably lead into a cellar."

The announcement came from a subordinate. M. Durocq, who seemed never to remove his eyes from Mrs Andrews for many moments together, received it with a show of amusement, although it is possible that he had observed that it had not amused her.

"Ah! a cellar! I find this truly droll; that the master and mistress of a house should be supposed to be willing to receive their visitors in a cellar."

"There is a light below."

"A light! in a cellar! at this time of the day! Then it begins almost to look as if it were the reception-room after all! Madam is ready? It will be to her a novel experience to descend into a cellar; this is a case in which I do not presume to imagine that she would wish to lead the way."

The little lady laughed, oddly, unexpectedly. There was a quality in her laughter which seemed to make the impassive Frenchman start.

"Oh, but I should!" she cried. "You seem to have a gift, M. Durocq, for being wrong, and a genius for blunders. If I must go down into that cellar the only way I will go will be first!"

She was standing a few feet from the door which, when it was closed, veiled the descent into the cellar. While she was speaking she moved quickly forward, and, in a moment, was past the man who had discovered the staircase. M. Durocq, ever on the alert, quick to suspect, was yet taken unawares; before he had guessed her intention she was beyond his reach.

"Stop her!" he exclaimed to the man who stood with the door held open to show what was beyond.

The fellow did his best to obey the order, but it was too late. He made a hasty grab at her, but she was already past; she eluded him with ease.

"You're not quick enough!" she laughed. "I'm going to lead the way into the cellar!"

Her laughter came up the stairs as she ran down them.

"After her!" shouted M. Durocq. "It looks as if we're on the scent at last!"

He was the first to act on his own suggestion, springing down the stairs two at a time, rushing after her with an agility which did him credit. The others followed in a higgledy-piggledy crowd.

But they were too late. M. Durocq was the only one in time to see what happened, and his impression of what transpired was but a hazy one. He saw the dainty figure of the little lady standing, in the dim light, at the end of the cellar which was farthest from the stairs. She was looking round, not at him, but at someone who was bending over a figure which lay at full length upon the ground. She was pointing something at these two persons which she held in her outstretched hand. There was a sudden report: he knew that she was firing at

one or other of these two persons. He dashed towards her as fast as he could go. She saw him coming. It seemed to him that she vanished from his sight as by some stroke of magic: one second she was there, the next she was gone.

The explanation of her disappearance, however, was immediately made clear when, in his furious flight, he all but precipitated himself head foremost through an opening in the floor; pulling himself up, with an effort, to find a grave-shaped cavity yawning at his very feet.

CHAPTER XLI

AFTERWARDS

THE little lady had thrown herself into the pit which she had hoped would be a living tomb for others. It was, indeed, a case of poetic justice, for they found with her, at the bottom, Donna Luisa D'Agostino. The elder woman was dead. She had met the fate which, beyond doubt, she had meted out to many others. Her record, when it came to be examined, proved to be an extraordinary one. They had been well rid of her in Caracas. As she had cynically observed to Mrs Andrews, she had done evil all her life; and had persisted in doing evil to the very end. She had perished while engaged in carrying to a hideous consummation not the least of her crimes. A bullet, which they discovered embedded in her thigh, had probably been the immediate cause of her destruction; it was the one which Mrs Andrews had fired at her in what was really self-defence. If it had done nothing else, it had caused her to lose her balance and to drop like a stone to the bottom of the pit. The pit was nearly a hundred feet deep: they had to descend into it by means of scaling ladders. Such a fall was, in itself, sufficient to prove fatal to a person of her bulk.

When, after the lengthy interval which was necessary to enable them to obtain means of gaining access into that place of horror, they came on the little lady. She was still alive—but that was all: she died that night. She never regained consciousness; but muttered to herself at intervals; and the last two words which she uttered were distinctly audible. They were:

"George Otway."

As a commentary on her career such an utterance was not unfitting. Had she treated him as he deserved she would hardly, almost in the springtime of her life and beauty, have come to so inglorious an end.

Of Bianchi nothing has either been seen or heard. The problem of his disappearance exercised M. Durocq's mind for a considerable period; but it is understood that he has now given it up. It is supposed that Donna Luisa's husband succeeded, by some means or other, in reaching unnoticed the street which was behind his wife's house, and that thence he made the best of his way—it must have been a curious and agile way!—to one of the haunts with which he was acquainted, whither the ordinary policeman's warrant does not run. This, however, is but the purest surmise. Mrs Andrews stated that she had parted from him on the stairs ten seconds before encountering M. Durocq. She alone knew if that was true. But, whether true or false, no one has been discovered who could be induced to admit that he has since seen Mr Bianchi either dead or alive, and that although all the mechanism of the Paris police was set in motion to ascertain his whereabouts.

Mr Frank Andrews also escaped scot-free; that is, so far as legal consequences were concerned. He was arrested that afternoon at High Dene; but George Otway refused to have anything to do with his prosecution, and the police decided that they had not evidence to go upon unaided. He transferred himself to the United States. When last heard of he was an assistant in a dry goods store in one of the western cities. He would make not a bad assistant—according to his present employer—if it was not for his partiality for rye whisky. That partiality causes him to be oftener out of a situation than in.

George Otway is alive and well, as all the world knows—though that is not the name by which the world knows him. What the world does not know is this chapter in his biography, which is now made for the first time public. It was a long road, the one which led to health, and one which he had slowly to travel. But all the resources of medical science, which are at the service of the moneyed man, and which he had had to do without so long, were now at his command; and, aided by his fine natural constitution, the doctor pulled him through. He regards that portion of his life of which we have been telling as an escapade; a wild experience which, while he is far from wishing to go through it again, he yet would not desire to be without. And that for several reasons. As, for instance, because it showed him a side of life which

the ordinary man never sees, and which, therefore, he believes is non-existent. Indeed, George Otway is apt to observe that if he were to tell average Englishmen, soberly, calmly, the things he did; the things that were done to him; the things he passed through; his hearers would suppose he romanced, and that merely because their horizon is limited, since stranger things than those which happened to him are happening every day.

Then, again, throughout the whole episode there was the sense of battle. Almost from the moment in which he saw Jacob Gunston climbing on to the parapet of Southwark Bridge, he had to measure himself against many and various adversaries. And George Otway is essentially a fighting man. That he was beaten in the end, and, but for a seeming miracle, would have been worsted utterly, and for ever, to a man of his temperament is not a fact wholly to be deplored. The odds against him were great: they broke, but they did not bend him. He defied them, even while they overwhelmed him by mere force of numbers. It is not disagreeable to be able to reflect that he has given his proofs that that is the sort of stuff of which he is moulded.

There is another reason why he does not regret that escapade. It gave him a wife. Elsie Thornton was for a longer period in the valley of the shadow than he was. There were times when it was doubtful if she would ever emerge from it at all, except as a ghost of her former self. But she won through in the end—the Elsie Thornton of yore. She is the mistress of High Dene; a happy wife and mother.

Her brother Frank is a barrister; one, too, who is coming to the front. He has a tendency towards Quixotism when brought into contact with what he believes to be a blunder of the law. He has held an unpaid brief for more than one suspect, and cleared him of suspicion.

Sallie Price thrives. She is now the proprietor of a flourishing music-hall in a great provincial town. She manages it herself. It is only on the retired list that she continues to be known as the Greatest Bender the World has ever seen.

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